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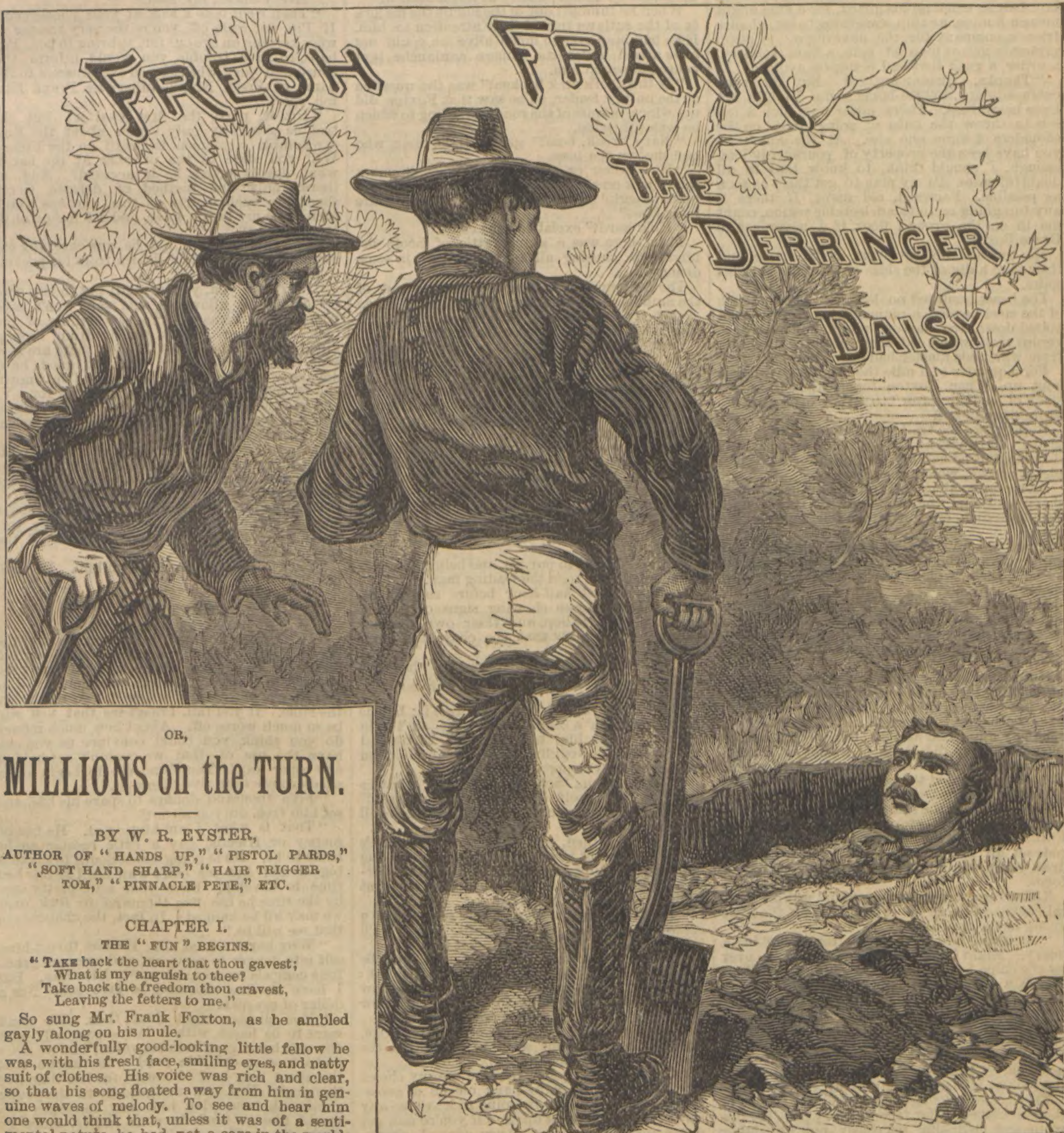
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OR,
MILLIONS on the TURN.

BY W. R. EYSTER,
AUTHOR OF "HANDS UP," "PISTOL PARDS,"
"SOFT HAND SHARP," "HAIR TRIGGER
TOM," "PINNACLE PETE," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE "FUN" BEGINS.

"TAKE back the heart that thou gavest;
What is my anguish to thee?
Take back the freedom thou cravest,
Leaving the fetters to me."

So sung Mr. Frank Foxton, as he ambled
gayly along on his mule.

A wonderfully good-looking little fellow he
was, with his fresh face, smiling eyes, and natty
suit of clothes. His voice was rich and clear,
so that his song floated away from him in gen-
uine waves of melody. To see and hear him
one would think that, unless it was of a senti-
mental nature, he had not a care in the world;
nor, for that matter, that he would know what
to do with them if he had any.

THE EXECUTIONERS STARTED BACK IN SOME LITTLE SURPRISE. TO THEIR ASTONISHMENT
FRESH FRANK WAS STANDING BOLT UPRIGHT IN ONE END OF THE GRAVE.

He caroled through the verse of Claribel's old love ditty, and then broke off with a laugh.

"A dozen years since I heard it, as I am a sinner! In that time I think I sung it once. Wonder what put it in my head this morning? I must certainly be going to think of Madelaine. I once rendered it for her benefit, but the little witch didn't half-appreciate it. Sentiment was not in her line! I wasn't half-bad to flirt with, but for serious business she would prefer to talk to a man. Ahem! If I had known how badly I really was smitten, I might have told her that I was that identical article from the ground up. Fresh Frank is dandy enough, but not the kind she took him for. I guess there were two of us fooled, and that's a fact."

Then Foxton gave vent to something very much like a sigh, and hummed the second verse of the song, filling its last lines with any amount of suppressed fervor—to break off into a heartier laugh than before.

In an absence of mind that was rare for him he had touched his bridle-rein. As a result, the mule stood stock-still, with its long ears pricked back. He might be listening to the music; but it was more likely that he was waiting for orders.

"Orpheus galvanized a heap of life into things, but he never turned a mule into a stone. My music has just knocked poor Rhadamanthus stiff. Ah!"

In an instant Foxton had become quite a different individual. To his ears had come the sound of a pistol-shot.

In this section of the country that meant danger. The crack of a rifle could not have put him half so much on his guard, for a rifle might mean a hunter, a camp, something to eat, chance friends, company for the next night. A pistol probably meant man at man, a fight, robbery, murder, a gang that had better be avoided.

"Thanks, Rhadamanthus! But for your extraordinary, hybrid-horse sense I might not have heard that. There never was such a fellow to throw the onus of going ahead on the shoulders of some one else. At the same time you have been the property of yours truly long enough, I should think, to know that in all doubtful cases it's my plan to get there as soon as possible. Forward, old man! If there is any fun going on in this delectable region, count me in on the ground floor, if I never get to Brace Box."

He touched his revolvers as he spoke, and then gave a dig at the sides of the mule with his spurs.

The beast hesitated no longer. At the touch of the steel he gave a plunge for a starter, then bolted down the narrow, rough, and even dangerous trail, which led straight in the direction from which his master had heard the shot.

For a quarter of a mile the headlong rush was kept up. Then Foxton found himself in the thick of enough "fun" to satisfy even a rattle-brain like himself.

Right there the trail widened out into a little glade. Of course he knew nothing of what was to come, but he had his eyes open for a possible picket or two, which was fortunate.

As he came along at full speed there was a sharp hail, and the well-known "Hands up!" Two horsemen, one on either side, guarded the road.

There was no question about their being fair game. Frank had decided on that the instant he saw them, which was a trifle before they spoke.

Men that wear ponchos by daylight, when the sun shines, and carry black masks on their faces, are individuals to shoot or to run away from. Their sharp order was not needed to prove that.

Unfortunately for them they were in the habit of speaking first and shooting afterward. They did not suspect that the man who seemed to have both hands engaged in trying to stop a runaway mule, had also his fingers on a pair of triggers. They did think of a shot at Rhadamanthus, but, before their idea was half-formed, Foxton punctuated their "Hands up!" with exclamations from the derringer in either hand.

The result was the falling inflection. The two men reeled away, stunned, if not slain, while Frank, dropping the derringers into his pockets, rode on all the faster. Within the next hundred yards the fun would probably come to a focus.

"They've got 'em, sure enough," was his mental exclamation, as he caught sight of the little group in the trail ahead.

"As usual, I've been in too thunderin' big a hurry. Might have known it would all be over by the time I was ready to chip in. Still, as there's a lady in the case, I ought to do my level best. And as I've got into the mix I hate to run away. Here we are and all to stay!"

Drawn up by the side of the trail was a vehicle, closely resembling an army ambulance. Harnessed to it were four mules, that were just now held by two men, though the quadrupeds did not look at all desirous of making a move.

There was a young lady sitting by the side of the ambulance. Her face was very pale, her lips white and twitching nervously, but altogether she was enduring the situation remarkably well, especially if the gentleman in the foreground,

with bare head and blood trickling down his face, was her father.

Doubled up in a heap, just where he had fallen, was one of the masked men, with a ghastly hole in the very center of his face, while the rest of the gang, to the number of a half-dozen, were standing around the traveler, who had at least got in one good blow in self-defense.

The odds were large—too large for one man—but Frank Foxton was not in the habit of considering such problems when there was no money involved. He went at them full speed and trusted to luck to carry him through.

He came down on the outlaws like a hurricane, only reserving his fire until he could be positively certain of his aim. A man on a horse at full speed is an uncertain mark; and if the horse happens to be a mule, so much the better.

Though the mule continued to go on, Foxton came to a sudden halt before he was quite ready to open the ball. He had passed one outpost and had no idea of there being another, so that, when a long, snake-like coil shot out, he bent his head just too late. The noose was tightening on his neck and shoulder!

Luckily for him his feet were already loosened in the stirrups; and he flung himself out of the saddle without much regard to where he went. He caught a tremendous fall, but he saved his neck.

For about five minutes he knew as little as a man could know and still remain alive. What followed immediately after his pause was, therefore, unseen by him.

He accomplished at least half of his object, if the method was not exactly as he planned it.

When he tumbled out of the saddle the majority of the outlaws turned their attention to him. If he had been ever so much alive he could not have arisen under the human avalanche that poured down on him.

"Is this fool's neck broken?" was the question of the outlaw leader, as he saw that Foxton did not wince, in spite of the rough handling to which he was subjected.

"Nary break, boss!" growled the man who had thrown the lasso.

"He's quick ez a cat, an' ef I hedn't put a fancy jerk on the rope he'd 'a' lit on his feet, an' been pluggin' somebody. Shell I put my knife inter him?"

"Hold hard!" exclaimed the chief.

Then there was a sharp rattle of hoofs behind them, causing all to turn about, in some dismay.

The gentleman who had been hauled out of the ambulance had his wits about him. When everybody had left him, with the exception of a man at his shoulder, he saw his chance.

Back went his foot with a terrific swing. Next, he wheeled and struck out from his shoulder. The kick doubled the man to the front; the stroke sent him backward. Before any one noticed the little affray, the prisoner had sprung to a convenient horse, flung himself upon its back, and darted away!

Then some scattering shots were fired at the fugitive—none of them seeming to take effect—and then a rush for horses. The chief was the only man who retained his coolness.

"Steady there! The first four mounted follow. The rest look after the prisoner! Tie this fellow up, and watch the woman till I get back!"

He dashed away in pursuit, and being splendidly mounted, was soon the leading man.

It was a good half-hour before they all returned, their horses showing signs of having had a furious gallop, and their own manner telling pretty plainly that the chase had been unsuccessful.

"Now then," said the chief briskly, "has that idiot come to life? If so what has he got to say for himself?"

"He's all alive, an' don't yer furgit it; but he ain't b'in sayin' a blame word. We ain't b'in tryin' ter make him talk, neither. Ef we hed got his tongue wogglin' thar's no gamblin' on what mou't hev happened to him."

"Stand him up, then, and let's hear what he has to say for himself. The girl is all right, is she?"

"Hezn't moved ner whimpered. She looks all broke up."

"Hold her, then, and take no risks. She's worth her weight in silver, anyhow. So, young man, you've chipped into this game with a perfect freshness. What do you think the best thing we can do with you?"

"That depends, partner. There seems to be a crowd in this gang, and you dealt. Reckon I'll hold the age till I see what the rest say."

"Better name your vanity at once, and be done with it. Of course you'll have to croak; but, as we like to give every man a fair show it's no more than right to ask you just how you'd best admire to go over the range."

The chief looked at Foxton keenly as he spoke, but his gaze did not seem to disconcert the fresh sport, as he answered:

"Oh, if you're going to give me my choice I'll be like the Irishman—hang me on a gooseberry-bush. If you are going to leave me any sort of a show, open it up; and if you're not, get down to business as soon as you can. I always did hate to be in suspense."

As he spoke a man came staggering down the

trail. He was bleeding freely, and his face was ashen-white.

"That's him!" shouted this man.

"He's done fur Ad, an' he's put daylight clean through me! Plug him, quick, afore he kin git a chance fur more fun."

"So you've turned up, have you?" grimly asked the captain, turning at the sound. "You let this man get by; and then come here to raise a howl! I'm not caring much if he has cleaned you both up. When the man got here I wasn't sending to see what had happened there. Keep a button on your lip now, and let men talk."

The discipline of the road-agents was perfect. Although the wounded man seemed ready to drop, not a soul turned an eye toward him until the captain, by a crook of his thumb, indicated that he might be looked after. He had been caught napping on outpost duty, and for such there was very little mercy.

But, Frank Foxton was under no particular discipline. When he had anything to say he generally spoke—regardless.

He spoke just now.

"You're a leetle rough on the poor fellow, captain. It wasn't their fault if a cyclone struck them; and if you have a better pair of men it's as well you didn't have them there. You would have been just so much out on the live stock."

"The cyclone blew itself out mighty sudden, then," responded the captain, dryly, and without a trace of anger in his tone.

"I suppose the boys have gone through you for all your wealth?"

"Every ducat, my lord."

"Then we'll take a look at your photograph. If I'm not wide off, you're the very rooster we were keeping an eye out for, to bring to pot. Perhaps, to save trouble, you would inform this court and jury whether you ever answer to the name of Fresh Frank—otherwise Frank Foxton, sport."

"Hit it, pard, the first chatter! But the trouble generally only begins about the time my humble cognomen is heard on the breeze. Will you state to the prisoner at the bar of what deadly crime he is accused? And, as there's only one method of defense worth shucks, in such courts as this, perhaps you'll then untie my hands loose, and let me go at it, tooth and nail."

The captain heard, but he was carefully examining a letter he had drawn from his pocket.

He returned it slowly.

"Sorry for you, young man; but in this case no defense is allowable, and salt won't save your mortal remains. To say nothing of the fact that your life is forfeit from having killed one of the Black Eagles, there are reasons, amounting to one thousand good, hard dollars, why you should die. As I've known one of my boys to cut a man's throat for a V, and throw a grave in, you can judge. Here, you Numbers One and Five! Kill him when the procession moves on."

It was all so coldly said, in such a stern, matter-of-fact way, that there could be no doubt as to his meaning. Number One and Number Five stepped forward, loosening their pistols.

Then the girl, who had been listening in silent horror, sprung to her feet, and rushing forward, flung her arm around the neck of the sport, as she cried:

"Back! Do not dare to harm him. He shall not die."

CHAPTER II.

ALONE IN HIS GRAVE.

"It appears to me," said the captain of the Black Eagles, "that you have about enough to do to run your own affairs, without humping yourself in front of a perfect stranger. Still, if you think you can manage it, you might try the rifle. If you fail, I don't see that you will be so much worse off. About how much money do you think you could convince us you can have the use of—that we couldn't get hold of any other way? There's no use to begin on a smaller ante than five thousand."

"Five thousand dollars to spare his life, and set him free, do you mean?"

"That is what I am hinting at. He has no money or friends, gay a little rooster as he looks to be. He is going down South to make a big strike; but we can't wait until he has had time to develop. Bless your soul, pretty one, by the time he has five thousand to fork over we may all be banged. In fact, the chances are that we will be."

"Why harm him at all? He has thrust himself into danger to serve us, and common gratitude compels me to speak a word for him. But I have no five thousand to give you. Nor a dollar of my own."

"You can stop right there, then. We don't want to be harsh with a lady—especially with one who has a good market value; but we can't go back on an old side pard who fancies that the sport may be in his way, for less than five thousand. You can say good-by to the young gentleman, and give him any messages you would like to send to your father, since no doubt they will meet soon, somewhere in the summer land. But, really, we must be moving."

"Have you no mercy at all?" asked the girl bitterly. "Not a week ago he saved my life in the flood at the risk of his own. Now, must he die for trying once more to help me? Kill me if you must, but let him go!"

"I guess you're a bigger fool than you look, marm. I see you haven't even noticed the neat little hint I gave you, so I won't try to break your heart putting it plainer. If you're done cuddling the young man, we had better be moving, as I said."

He waved his hand, and before the young lady could utter a protest, she was swung away by two men who had approached her from behind.

"Put her in the ambulance. It's going to be easy to carry her that way for awhile, and then we can turn the mules loose. Might load up that infernal driver and take him along. No use to be too bloodthirsty."

Foxton's countenance had been perfectly immovable during this conversation. When he could do nothing, it was not the correct thing, according to his notion, to either help or make a woman bandy words with any such individual as the Captain of the Black Eagles.

The mention of a driver interested the sport, however. So far, since Fred's arrival, he had not been seen or heard from.

They hauled him out from a blanket that had been thrown over him, just where he lay, on the further side of the ambulance, after he had been gagged and bound.

A queer-looking, fat old fellow he was, with long, bushy gray whiskers, and a circle of long gray hair low down around the skull. He wore a roundabout and pantaloons made from bear's hides, dressed with the fur on, and moccasins on his feet. He looked around sharply enough, since the blanket had before prevented his seeing what was going on, and little if any of the conversation had reached his ears.

He had very scant time for observation, since he was bundled into the wagon without more ceremony than if he had been a bale of hay, but in the glance that Foxton had of him, he recognized "Old Sirene," as he was universally called when spoken of.

"In the name of the sacred grizzly, where did they pick the rascal up? It's a premium on bad luck to have that measly old Jonah in the outfit. Since the hour he was scalped he's had hot water every day, with trouble by the peck every night. If I had known he was on this trail, I'd have gone around the other way. He'll come out all right, though; and it's not just so certain I won't go up the flume. I don't see a ghost of a chance to break loose, and, unless I can, the outlook is decidedly bilious. This rooster is not the man to do nothing but bluff, and I guess in a minute I'll see all the cards that are out against me."

Foxton's reflections were not altogether of a cheerful nature, but he allowed no shade of dismay to appear on his face as he watched two corpses and a badly wounded man loaded in. Then the captain turned to him.

"By-by, young man, for good!" A few such jobs as this would make an awful hole in the Eagles. Sorry for you, as you're a gritty sort of a little cuss, but you've been too fresh this time—entirely too fresh, and it's our only chance to get even. The boys will attend to you—if they don't bring in your scalp I'll attend to them. I won't shock the lady's nerves by fixing it up, myself, but will get there all the same. So long!"

"All right! I never beg—at High, Low, Jack, or any other game. I'll play you a hand of eucher for five thousand a side and send you the coin if you win; or I'll cut for Jack and the one that gets the high heels blows the other cold and is boss of the Eagles. If that don't suit you, drive on your heels! Living or dead, we'll meet again, and your humble servant will be getting things level."

"Sorry, but the offers don't suit. I've got a better thing of it here, and we'll wait for the hereafter to come. Farewell, sonny—a long farewell!"

"*Au revoir!*" answered Frank, lightly; the captain sprang on his horse and led the way, the ambulance, all of the men but two, and the led horse, following.

They were hardly out of sight when one of the masks turned to Foxton.

"Now then, boss, ef yer wants ter drive a barg'in we're hyar listenin'. Spot cash yer on-derstands. We'll hev ter skip, an' can't do no credit game."

"Thanks, boys, for the offer; but it won't work. If I had a little *cache* and put you on it you'd only be that much ahead and I would go out of the wet all the same. Talk to me next week and I'll see what I can do for you."

"It's jest ez ther capt'n sez. Ye'r' too blame fresh fur yer own good. Yer think ye'r' mighty sharp—an' mebbe yer ain't so fur off. I'd hate ter go plumb back on a man like ther cap'n, even fur coin. An' ef I don't, orders is orders. Ef you hedn't chipped an' gi'n him a chance ter git away we'd 'a' hed ther other ger-loot in a hole, an' right thar, whar he'd hev bin, we're ter put you. Ketch him by ther other shoulder, Johnny, an' roust him along."

Between the two, Frank was forced away from the trail.

When they had gone a dozen rods they came to the hole, and that did more to prove what sober earnest they were all in than ever so much talk. No men would have taken quite so much trouble in digging a grave, if they had not expected to have a corpse to put in it.

Still, the fresh sport remained unmoved and undismayed.

"Ah, very neatly done! A dollar to a dime—strictly on time, you understand—that there was an Irishman in the detail. Nobody else can handle a spade quite to the same advantage. Why in the name of wrath didn't you stick your stiffs in there, instead of hauling them all 'round the country?"

"Wouldn't hev left room fur you, boss. An' it don't make no difference who gits a sight at your corpus; but mebbe it wouldn't be quite so snifty fur all ther world ter see theirn. Git in; we're a-waitin'."

Foxton had been led quite to the edge of the grave. He looked dubiously down. As his hands were tied behind his back, it was not altogether the pleasantest thing in the world to attempt the operation.

"Oh, get in!" growled the other ruffian, as by a dexterous kick he knocked the sport's feet from under him, so that he fell heavily into the hole.

"I thought I heard a leg break," he continued, looking down at Frank, who lay perfectly still.

"If I did, he takes it stiddy. But it don't make no great difference, anyhow. Load in ther dirt."

Without hesitation, they began to throw in the soil with a brace of shovels.

Fortunately, the ground was loose and gravelly. Two or three of the bowlders that had been taken out lay beyond the radius of dirt.

After a couple of minutes' work, the two stopped to rest.

"He's a game bird, if ever one went into the pit," remarked one, as he thrust his shovel into the ground and began to dig with his knife at a splinter in his hand.

"I'll bet you he's a terrible fighter, on his own heels er with ther gaffs."

"You kin see that. He laid out two men afore he war redy ter start. Ef it hedn't bin fur Mike an' his rope, he'd 'a' made it all-fired lively fur ther boys."

"But he got hisself elected, all the same. Say! I don't more ner half like this hyar job. Ef he'd git up an' yowl fur ter git erway, it wouldn't be so bad. What's ther cuss doin' now? Take er peep at him."

Now that the subject was started, curiosity drew them both forward. They moved to the edge of the hole and peeped downward.

The executioners started back in some little surprise. To their astonishment Fresh Frank was standing bolt upright in one end of the grave, and though seemingly buried to the shoulders, the top of his head was nearly level with the surface of the ground. He was securely anchored, but, unless the ground was pretty well packed and heaped over him, there was no danger of immediate death.

"He give me a skeer, and that's a fact," laughed the one who had proposed taking the look.

"It ain't much likely there'll be any gerloot along ther trail, but ef ther war, it's just ez well ef he can't woggle that 'fater-trap ov hissen. Hold on tell I fix him up, 'cordin' ter Gunter!"

It seemed like a senseless cruelty; but the two were built after that fashion, or they would not have been intrusted with the work. Reaching down, the man applied a gag that he had ready in his pocket.

"Thar, blame yer! I guess you'll hold yer yawp. Now, Ben, chuck it in, an' we'll tuck it neat under his chin. We'll go ther limit on this job, an' leave him a chance ter say a few prayers fur our pard ez he's sent over ther range."

Foxton's face never altered its expression, nor did a muscle twitch. He continued to stare straight before him while the men threw in the dirt faster than ever.

The pit filled rapidly. At the opposite end the mound was higher than the head of the unfortunate captive.

Then they handled the work more carefully. From Foxton's neck there rose a funnel-shaped opening. Packed by the spades, the little wall arose until it was higher than the crown of the fresh sport. At the distance of a few yards his head was entirely concealed in what looked to be a freshly-sodded grave.

The two men gave a last glance. Their work seemed well done, and escape impossible.

"Ther compliments of ther Eagles!" said the greater ruffian. "When yer killed one yer scratched all. Ye'r' thar ter stay. So-long!"

Then they turned and strode away, leaving Foxton alone in his grave.

CHAPTER III.

A RESURRECTION AND SEVERAL REAPPEARANCES.

FOR some little time Brace Box bade fair to become a place of importance. The rush went there on the report of rich placer diggings, and

for a while the success of nearly every person in the camp was phenomenal. There was plenty of room, and every person that got down to the old river-bed had a chance to make a little fortune.

They had the chance, but it took extra hard work. A man had to labor a good while without the remotest chance of finding color before he could strike pay gravel. When he found it, though, the buckskin filled up mighty fast.

In addition to this, there were plenty of men who claimed that there were tons of gold in the mountains that lay a mile or so away from the town. No one had fairly investigated as yet, but it was the opinion of many that the quartz was worth more than the sand.

They said as much, and the fame of the diggings, and the prophecy of future greatness went abroad, until men could not get there fast enough.

There were miners there—and other miners. Nearly every one had a claim on which he wished to realize a fabulous fortune; but some worked one way and some another. For a good two months after it was founded, Brace Box was almost too lively to describe. The gamblers, shoulder-bitters, shooters, and roughs from all creation seemed to have got there.

The first reports and subsequent investigations indicated that it would be a permanent town. It was a lively, rattling burg, clean on the very outskirts of mining-camp civilization. People that went further came back and stayed there. If they were too late for a corner lot they took something else. There was a graveyard at the outskirts of the town; and the citizens loudly proclaimed that, one way or another, they could make room for everybody.

One could see representatives of almost every nationality under the sun, and pretty good specimens they were.

Of course, with such a rapidly-increasing list of citizens, the presence of a stranger, or a hundred, for that matter, would hardly be noticed. The people had not got shaken together, though the old settlers were beginning to get acquainted through the medium of the saloons, and grocery stores. As yet the town was not in the Postal Directory, but an enterprising store-keeper had started a private institution that was almost as good as the simon-pure article. He put up a sign, got on a lot of stamps, and arranged with the stage company to take his mail-sack to Jumptown until such time as the Government would extend the star route service to Brace Box. On the return the driver brought mail back from Jumptown, where the present regular service stopped.

Jared Brown was the name of this self-appointed postmaster; and he had found considerable honor and much profit in the arrangement.

Late in the afternoon of the day following the interment of Frank Foxton the crowd at Brown's store was a little larger than usual. It was about the time the stage usually got there, and there seemed to be a general interest concerning the expected mail.

Everybody was looking to the front; and yet very few noticed a tall, fine-looking man, of middle age, who came quietly into the store.

After a glance around, to get his bearings, this man advanced to the counter at the further end, where a pigeon-holed box was visible. There he asked if there were any letters for Edward Raleigh.

"No sir," was the response of the clerk. "There was nothing in the last mail; and that for to-day has not come in yet. We are expecting it any moment. Won't you wait; and is there anything else you would like to purchase, or look at?"

"Not until after the mail. That will decide whether to go on or not. I may need considerable of an outfit. I'll call again, later on."

He turned and went out, apparently unconscious that a pair of keen black eyes watched him, their owner presently coming forward to the counter.

"That man—his name, please thou?"

"Raleigh, sir; Edward Raleigh."

"A thousand thanks. It is a stranger. Yet to me his face looked like the face of an old friend. Another time am I mistaken?"

He bowed low with the courtly grace of a gentleman of the Mexican race; and then stepped to the door.

He was in time to see Raleigh cross the street in the direction of Jim Bower's hotel. He was also in time to come face to face with a tall, stoutly built man, in the red shirt and heavy boots of a miner.

The start that he gave showed that this man was not altogether a stranger; and when he heard a low whisper of "wait for me," he loitered along until the individual rejoined him.

"You here?" he said, turning his head, to get a view of the face that was almost concealed from sight by a heavy, brown beard.

"Of course, my darling! Why wouldn't I be here? It's always the best plan to have headquarters chuck up to the line of operations."

"But if you should be recognized?"

"Ain't in the wood. There's none of the gang, even, that know the boss when he's off duty; and you wouldn't if I hadn't told you. Oh,

don't you forget it that I'm looking out for my own precious neck. A man don't count on following this line of business any great length of time, and if he's got an ounce of horse sense he will have an eye open for the future."

"Yet some day some one may recognize you."

"A mighty cold day it will be for some one, that's all."

"I believe you, my friend—your name I have not yet heard?"

"Wilson, John Wilson, at your service. Say that over slow, so you won't forget it; and don't you call me anything else till further orders."

"Then, Mr. Wilson, I see that our friend got through in spite of you. I told you that he had Satan's own luck; and nerve for a dozen."

"Yes. He seems to have got away all right; but I had him very foul until another friend of yours chipped in, on a full hand. Then, we had a streak of industry and good luck combined; raking him in just as the other got away."

"And who was it, this second man?"

"I had your photograph of him in my pocket, or I wouldn't have known him from a side of sole-leather."

"Not Foxton—the fresh sport! It is too good! You killed him?"

"Hush! Don't speak so inconveniently loud. We buried him. If he gives you any more trouble I reckon he will have to come back over the range to do it."

"I can forgive you for losing the other, since this was doubly dangerous. We must get at Raleigh before he leaves Brace Box; and it will take him some days to do that."

"Longer than that, if he is half white."

"How so?"

"Because, if we didn't keep the father we held on very tight to the daughter. The young lady is still in our hands, and that's what brought me down to Brace Box. I want to see what sort of a deal can be made all around."

"His daughter?"

The Mexican seemed more than astonished. He looked at Wilson suspiciously, and after that exclamation was silent.

"Yes, if appearances and her declaration are to be believed. A little angel, she is, on tin wheels. Handsome as a dream, and with nerve enough for anything. I've only enjoyed her charming society for a few hours, but I'm all gone already. It will take coin to tear her away from my protecting arms."

"I do not profess to understand you. He would not be so wild as to bring a girl with him on such a venture as he wants to make. Was not his old experience enough?"

"From certain observations of the young lady I am inclined to believe that she brought herself, very much to his disgust."

"You know what a young woman is? She found out that her father was going to see the country and decided that she would have a look at it, too."

"Now, what are you going to do about it?"

"My dear fellow, what can I do? Of course I can't appear to have any hand in the abduction of his daughter."

"Get off, there! You know what I mean!"

"What do you offer for the girl? When you buy her you have the nippers on her father. Of course you don't appear to them in the transaction unless you want to; but there are various ways in which she might be made useful. With her in your hands you can strike a better bargain than if you had him."

"That may be so; but the bargain was, I got his secrets and you got his cash. With the girl there is no cash for you to get."

"You're putting up the cash as a starter. You give me a thousand in addition to what you already owe me and I will guarantee the title and take half of the receipts for the balance of my expenses. Between us, then, if we can't scoop in all his available cash, credit and secrets I'm a bald-headed, knock-kneed, double-jointed Dutchman, with my toes turned up."

The Mexican seemed inclined to ponder the offer; the other to push it to the front.

"Come! Talk fast, I'm not yearning to linger around camp. Here's my best. For five thousand you may have her in any shape you want her—dead or alive—or I'll use her for you to the best advantage, and then go on with the old man, if necessary according to the original arrangement. You can hold him here with her a great deal better than if you used a club."

"Are you sure she is his daughter? He said nothing about her."

"Only have their word for it; but if she's not I should judge it was so much the better. She's a woman for a man to go wild over, and anyhow, they are traveling together. Of course, it's just about as easy to kill him here in Brace Box as along the road, and I guess it can be done before he puts any one on the scent, and starts a rush for the lost bonanza."

There was a cry of surprise from the Mexican; which was promptly mimicked by Wilson.

"Caramba! Yes. You did not think I knew what you were driving at. I generally have eyes and ears, and they are always open. You might have told me a little plainer what you were up to; but of course it makes no difference

in the long run. The principal inducement with us for a massacre *en route* was to get at his coin. As he didn't have any with him I'm fairly well-satisfied that yesterday was not my day on; of course we know he has it somewhere, and I propose to enjoy it. That's another reason why he shouldn't croak for the present."

"I understand. It has been a surprise to me, but I have not a doubt but that you are correct. It is a large sum of money that you ask, but perhaps it is worth it. Yet must I see her if it be possible, or, at least, know something more about her."

"Kee-rect. Never buy a pig in a poke, as I did when I tackled your fresh sport. If you want to see her—Hal! By the heavens! there she is now!"

There was no mistaking the surprise in the tones of the road-agent captain, as he pointed at an ambulance that was rolling toward the spot.

The dead had evidently come to life, and the captive had been set free. Miss Raleigh was leaning forward with an animated face, to speak to the driver, while Old Sirene cracked his whip and urged along the pair of mules in front at a rate that kept the mule fastened behind putting a good foot forward. By the side of the young lady sat Mr. Frank Foxton, a satisfied smile on his handsome face. As they passed the two men Fresh Frank looked them full in the face, at the same time gracefully raising his hat.

"They're all loose," growled the captain, in an undertone, "and what's worse he's dropped to me. I'll never bet again on what I don't see."

"What—what are you going to do about it?" asked his companion, nervously.

"Do? Why, kill him of course. I must save myself. He dies to-night."

CHAPTER IV.

MAJOR RALEIGH HAS HIS SUSPICIONS.

THE two men had walked on out of town as though they were returning to their cabins. When the ambulance passed there was no one else in sight, and it is likely that the Captain of the Black Eagles had some wild idea about shooting on sight. His hand was ready on the butt of his revolver—but the eyes of Fresh Frank were on him, and the captain was wise enough to know what that meant. He was willing to wait for a more convenient season.

Foxton gave one of his short laughs.

The young lady heard the sound and turned away quickly from Old Sirene.

"What is it?" she asked.

"You see our friends, yonder? The captain had more than half a notion to try a shot for good luck. That fellow along with him must be the silent partner that he hinted was back in the bushes. I've got his measure, anyhow."

"Surely, you must be mistaken. He would not dare to venture so near a town."

The young lady showed that if she had been less of a doubter she would have been thoroughly startled.

"No particular risk about it under ordinary circumstances. Probably he lives there. From what I have heard of Brace Box he is about as good as the average citizen. It's a lovely place to go to; and—you really must excuse me—if it was any one else I'd say there was something wrong in your father's upper story to think of taking you there."

"Oh, but he didn't think of taking me here. When I found out where he was going I made up my mind I would come; and a hard fight it was getting his consent."

"Then that lets him out, and when I see him I won't be compelled to speak my mind quite as plainly as I intended. Fact is, maybe I had better say nothing at all. You tell him from me, though, to keep his eyes open while in Brace Box."

"But do you think we will find him there? You are sure that you have not been speaking so positively to keep my spirits up? I have my fears."

The mention of her father altered her mood. At the last moment she was losing her nerve. They were half-way to the center of the camp, and it seemed now as though she could never wait until they passed the few hundred yards that separated them from Jim Bower's hotel.

Foxton was considerate. He admired too much the courage that she had shown in the face of danger not to overlook the trace of weakness now.

"I gave it to you as I saw it, Miss Raleigh, straight as a string. When he got out of the mix he knew you were reasonably safe if he opened his pocketbook, and I've no doubt he is here, waiting for a proposition. Yes. If my eyes don't deceive me, there he is now."

Miss Raleigh uttered a cry of delight, as she recognized the gentleman at whom Fred was pointing.

Edward Raleigh was not only in Brace Box, but having recognized, first the team, then Old Sirene, and finally his daughter, he darted straight at them, with a shout of joy, and a thorough carelessness of who and what might be in the road.

"My dear Rhoda!" he exclaimed, as he sprung into the ambulance.

"How does this happen? I have scarcely dared to draw my breath while I waited to hear from you. I felt certain that the first intelligence I obtained would be a demand for money from the wretches in whose hands I had left you. Were they milder than their manners, and have I done them a rank injustice?"

"You could scarcely have thought too hardly of them. If it had not been for Mr. Foxton, the gentleman coming to our assistance at the time you made your escape, I certainly would not have been here now; and there is no telling what might have happened to me hereafter."

They were both trying to be cool, though in spite of their words they were more or less painfully agitated. Raleigh looked around quickly, and his eyes fell upon Fresh Frank.

It was not hard to see what manner of man the young sport was; but Raleigh held out his hand anyhow, with a hearty gesture.

"I think, perhaps, that you can understand something of what I feel without any explanation from me. I do not care to say more just now, since we are at the hotel; but by and by I want to hear the whole story. An escape from such men as the Black Eagles must be worth hearing of."

"All right! There's very little of a yarn in it, but such as it is you can have it and welcome. I see you are stopping with Jimmy. Right enough! One might go further and faro worse."

"Yes. The house is better than I had hoped for. Come with us. I must know all that happened, and no doubt Rhoda will be too tired to speak."

Jimmy Bower was out in front as the ambulance halted, to help down his guests.

Their baggage was not very heavy, for the Black Eagles had cleaned that up pretty thoroughly; but Bower understood all that, and treated them to the best he had, upon the hint of Foxton.

"I'm a talker, Mr. Raleigh, from 'way back, but I must have breakfast, dinner and supper, all rolled into one, before I can say another word, and if I'm not off several yards Old Sirene and your daughter are just ready to paddle in the same boat. I suppose you can attend to us, Mr. Bower?"

"You kin bet," responded the host. "Scrub off ther soil and slick yerself fur ther lay-out. By that time it'll be ready."

A few minutes later and the four occupied a corner of the rough table to themselves, and Bower was bringing on the hot biscuit and cold meat as fast as they packed them away.

"Now, then, I feel a little fresher," remarked the sport, after twenty minutes of strict attention to business. "If there's any credit to be given to any one I guess you had better give it to the mule. I always knew he was 'way up in the altitudes, but I never guessed he would figure as the defender of injured innocence."

"Your mule?"

Mr. Raleigh seemed surprised.

"Yes. When they roped me off, Rhadamanthus went on till he came to a convenient place and then switched off the trail. He knows when to take to cover, and men nor angels could find him when he is lying low."

"By and by, when he thought the fun was pretty well over, he came sniffling back. By that time, if I wasn't dead I was pretty decently buried, in a regular, six-foot grave, sod over and a neat head stone ordered from the nearest monumental artist."

"They buried him alive!" exclaimed Miss Rhoda in a breathless sort of burst of interest, that was almost a sob. "They covered him, all but his face, and left him there to die—the heartless wretches!"

"That's about the fact," continued Frank, unmoved by the recollection.

"They allowed my eyes to rest on the distant tree-tops, and my fevered brow to feel the soft breezes. For fear the prospect would be so overpowering that I would yell, they put a gag in my mouth, and the last look they had of me my hands were tied behind my back."

"How, then, in the name of Heaven, did you get away?"

"I wasn't tied quite as fast as they thought I was; that's a fact. I slipped my hands out of the strings and worked them up about as fast as the dirt fell in. If the hole had not been quite so deep, I would not have asked odds of mule, agents, or anybody else, but when the dirt got over my shoulders, there I was until Rhadamanthus came browsing along, and presented his tail. I got hold of that, we gave a long pull, a strong pull, a pull all together, and out I came."

"But one would have thought that the weight of the ground would have crushed you."

"So it would, piled in at one dump; but I had a chance to settle it up a little, and you understand I scrouched considerable—as much as I could without getting a hitch on my knees, or a whack over the head with a shovel. I reckon you know as much about the mountains as I do, so I needn't tell you how I struck off on the trail, caught the mules with the wagon, and cached them."

"Then I struck Old Sirene. They had blindfolded him, carted him around till they thought

he had lost the trail, and turned him loose with a letter to you—asking for cash, of course.

"Sirene is no man's fool, and don't you forget it. We talked the matter over, and concluded we'd take a look at things before we went on to Brace Box.

"How we made the rifle you can guess. The captain and half his gang went off on business; and the rest scattered around, careless like. We took in a couple of them, picked up this young lady, and here we are."

"Nobly done, and if in anyway I can repay you for what you have done for me and mine, command me."

Raleigh reached over and once more clasped the sport's hand warmly, while Rhoda exclaimed that he had not told half of the story, and added a number of explanatory items that made it all seem doubly thrilling.

"Oh, spare my blushes," laughed Foxton.

"I'll look around the town a little, and see what sort of a burg they have here. If it's half-way up to its reputation it's a city on wheels. As I'm not going to stay long I'll have to hurry up to take it all in."

"Which way do you think of going from here?"

"South. I'm going to explore Mexico a little. They say it's a land of bonanzas, and it's about time I struck something rich."

Raleigh's face showed something of his surprise. He had opened his mouth, as though he intended to speak on the spur of the moment; but he changed his mind before the words dropped out. When he spoke, it was after a little reflection.

"I'm not greatly in love with that country. Rough as it is, I should prefer Brace Box. However, while you are here we hope to see a good deal of you. Perhaps before you can get ready, you may not decide to go at all."

"No telling. I'm liable to take any kind of a notion when I am flush; and to sing very low when I'm not. At present I'm not so overburdened with capital that I will be switching off on what seems a better opening. I'll let you know if I do, though."

Then Mr. Foxton, with a charming bow, took himself off, leaving father and daughter together to talk over the adventures of the past two days.

And they had a great deal to say, after they left the dining-room.

"It was running a terrible risk," said Mr. Raleigh; "but what else could I do? It was money the rascals were after. I could deal with them a great deal better from the outside than the inside, especially as I had to be on the outside to get any of the needful. I knew that I would hear from them soon on the subject of ransom, and then I could decide whether to pay or fight."

"That was just what Mr. Foxton said. What I feared was that you might have been killed or badly wounded while trying to escape. If he had not come to the rescue, and afterward cheered my spirits, I think I would have broken down altogether."

"Yet, this is only the beginning. Your headstrong folly will be apt to lead you into dangers you have not even dreamed of. And I have been just as foolish in consenting. Think, Rhoda, if it be not best for you to turn back even yet. After we leave this place it will be too late."

"But you did consent, papa. And if Mr. Foxton is always on hand—this is twice he has saved me—"

"Twice!"

Raleigh was evidently surprised.

"Yes. It was he who drew me out of the torrent when the stage was washed away. I did not know his name, but I recognized him the moment I again saw him."

To save a young lady from danger once was very praiseworthy; to repeat the operation in the course of a few days, seemed to Mr. Raleigh a different and a dangerous thing.

"In such a case," he said, slowly, "the reason for going back is all the stronger. I want to be sufficiently grateful to the gentleman, but he is hardly the style of individual I would desire you to choose as an intimate acquaintance."

"And in such a country as this it seems to me that he is the very identical individual to choose. In the dangers that are all the time coming along, he seems to see just what is to be done—and then he does it without delay. What better could you ask?"

"What better than a gambler, a reckless, soulless, hardened man, who, by his own confession, is known as Fresh Frank and the Fresh Sport? Why, he revels in death and danger! If they do not come otherwise, he provides them, both for himself and for his friends. I am only afraid we will see too much of him."

"Too much?"

"Yes. It is true that the evidence is slender, and that it is only a few minutes since my suspicions took shape; but I am almost confident that he is following us. Whether you are the attraction, or whether he has some other reason, I have not yet decided. Either case is bad enough."

He looked sharply at his daughter as he thus

spoke plainly; but there was no answering flush in her face, and he decided that if she was unduly interested in Fresh Frank, she was not yet aware of it.

CHAPTER V.

WOOLLY WALKER FROM 'WAY BACK.

"I don't think I ever saw a sweeter looking section of Pandemonium since I started on my travels—and I've seen some pretty hard places, too."

So thought Frank Foxton that evening, as he stood at the door of Kid Glove Hank's "Hole in the Ground."

He had descended some half a dozen steps, and could see the long, low, canvas-roofed cellar, that was known as the very worst place in highly immoral Brace Box.

For the average citizen it was not so bad, if he was willing to take his chances. The wolves generally made snapping and snarling enough; but they seldom fell to devouring each other until there had been a continued scarcity of strange lambs.

"If John Wilson wants to go on the war-path—as of course he will—this is about as likely a place as any for him to load up for the search. Besides I shouldn't wonder if half the cut-throats in there were Eagles, while that fellow behind the bar looks like the old friend that tried to cut my throat the first night I struck the diggings on Feather River, ever so long ago. Decidedly, a sweet place for my mother's darling; but we'll try it anyhow."

Foxton had not altogether wasted his time while he strolled around town. He had recognized the Captain of the Eagles, as that worthy had feared, and by luck and a few questions learned the name he chose to be known by when he visited Brace Box. He even discovered that he had been seen at the Hole in the Ground, though his informant did not seem to care to escort him to that delectable place.

"Just one word, stranger," added Frank, at last.

"Does Hank keep any decent whisky at all? I'll run the chance of the bullets; but I'll be hanged if I want to be poisoned."

"Bar's a little black bottle under the bar, ez gen'rally kerries ther pure mount'in jew. Ez you kin git him ter sot that out yer won't hev ter sneeze when he draws ther cork."

"And there's always a chance for a game there?"

"Allers."

"Then I'll risk it."

That was the outlook before he got there, and when he arrived at Hank's he found that things were even livelier than he had expected.

Having once made up his mind the Fresh Sport was not of the kind to hesitate. He stepped briskly through the doorway, and jauntily on to the bar, where he half turned and looked back over the room as he softly murmured:

"Things are lively here, pard, quite lively. Hope you have your animals under fair subjection, for I swear I don't remember ever seeing a tougher set—not even when you and I where on the Plumas together. But you look chipper as ever. This sort of thing seems to agree with you."

He did not even glance over his shoulder to see the start given by the man behind the bar. If he was right in his conjectures, when viewing the room from the doorway, it took some nerve to put his head within such tempting reach of those Herculean arms; to say nothing of the natural curiosity that one would have for a closer look at the burly proprietor.

There was nothing delicate about the physique of Kid Glove Hank. He was built from the ground up, with the face of a gambler, but the shoulders of a heavy-weight prize-fighter. He and Foxton were the only well-dressed men in the room; and Hank, if anything, was the daintier clad of the two. When he came to Brace Box he made his excuses with his muscle. After he had broken Slugger Bill's collar-bone, and set Wrestlin' Eph on his head, he was allowed to air his broadcloth and fine linen without further objection.

It remained to be seen whether the lambs would allow Fresh Frank to pass unchallenged.

"Don't know you, pard, from a side of sole-leather, and I can swear I never met you on the Plumas, because I've never been there. If you crowd 'em they are slightly tough, but as long as you don't put on frills, they'll let you pass in the crowd. Anything we can do for you in our line?"

Hank waved his hand—perhaps at the bar, or perhaps at the tables that were scattered along the side of the room. He was always ready to drink, gamble or fight.

"Ah, mistaken again. I thought maybe you would remember something about Billy McFadden's, and the high old times the boys used to have there. This is something like it. Now, if you'll just set out that black bottle that's under the bar, we can take a cosey drink together, and I can imagine myself at home."

"There's the vial, but I don't remember any Billy McFadden."

"No," said Frank, as he carelessly tossed out the liquor, and then pushed the bottle back for Hank to help himself.

"But the Hole runs along about after the same pattern, and this looks to be as good tippie as Billy set up for the friends that wouldn't go his forty-rod. Has Johnny Wilson been in yet this evening?"

"Don't know him," promptly responded Hank. "You're a stranger around here yourself, ain't you?"

"Kind of betwixt and between. I've been here before, though the Hole wasn't running then. As I live pretty much all 'round, I'm always at home, and a stranger nowhere. If there's any coin in Brace Box, I guess it will do for headquarters for awhile, anyhow."

"There's coin enough here for a man that knows how to gather it in. There's some fellows, frinstance, that are doing fair for their line."

He nodded with his head toward a party that was playing poker at one of the side-tables. Rough, whisky-ridden men they were, and two of them were evidently winning freely enough to put them in a good humor. The visible capital on the board might have amounted to twenty-five dollars.

Frank shrugged his shoulders.

"Do I look like that kind? Thankee, pard; but they can't club their wealth and raise enough for a fair ante. I just dropped in to see what the Hole was like. If I stay, you'll be apt to see me again."

The two talked together the pleasantest way in the world. Hank was sizing up his visitor, who, for his part, was taking in Hank and everybody else. If any one else had talked to either of these men as the other did in the out-start, there would probably have been war. Hank, however, had an interest in learning what Frank Foxton might be after, while the latter was not at all anxious for a difficulty; but only spoke after the usual freshness of his style. Perhaps he had an eye to making an opening for Mr. John Wilson, if he happened to be about, and wished to come in.

"Sorry am I," said Kid Glove Hank, "that none of the chiefs are about to-night; sooner, however, than you should go to bed disappointed. I'll try how your luck and my luck fit together. I don't know much about cards, you understand; but I must keep things moving in the Hole."

"You're my man then, for a dollar or more. I feel my luck up on the boom and I want to make hay while the sun shines. Where do you want it?"

"Oh, right here will do as well as anywhere. I have to keep an eye on the lambs or they might bankrupt me while I was away; but you needn't fear they won't treat you white while I am around. When I nod the gang generally sneezes according to order."

"That's the style, exactly. I mind it of old. Nothing could be prettier," said Frank, looking around enthusiastically.

"That's one reason why I like to ruffle the pasteboards with the boss of such a shebang. There's no outsiders chipping in to explain how the hands ought to be played. I'm learning more every year, and you'll find I've got to be pretty hard to crawl. Come! Give us a chair and throw around! There's a heap of fun to be got out of cards, and fun is what I live on. A dollar ante will do to begin on—and I've got a whole boat-load of cart-wheels in my pocket."

Frank threw himself carelessly by the side of a little, rough table, just at the end of the bar; and Kid Glove Hank, who had turned things over to an assistant, seated himself opposite and the game began.

Mr. Foxton was fresh in tongue and manner, but he understood draw-poker, and played the game for about all that it was worth, while the proprietor was not throwing away any chances. Both men were reasonably suspicious of each other, even if the outside world could not see it.

It was not long before there were a dozen or more interested spectators; but, as Foxton had hinted, they had little to say, and that little was very quietly whispered.

The fortunes of the game were varied.

First one was a winner, and then the other.

Kid Glove Hank, after a few hands, took the lead for a season and won rapidly. Then luck seemed to change and Frank won back his losses and began to get well in front. When the ante is a dollar and bets range from five dollars to fifty the game may not be very brilliant and yet the circulation of coin will be rapid.

Hank seemed to think so as Foxton went twenty better, and he looked again at his own hand to see what it would carry.

"I'll have to go about twenty-five better, just to keep the pile on the table from being so ridiculously small; but I wish some of the chiefs would come in. I like to have a chance for more money at the same risk, don't you see, and there's room for two or three more good men in this game."

"Hyar's one ov yer chiefs now!"

A coarse, hoarse voice uttered the exclamation, a chair came heavily down at one of the vacant sides of the table, and with a grin on his brutal features a man seated himself and deposited a heavy buckskin bag on the board with a bang.

Then he stared at the two as though he did not

much care whether they accepted his challenge at cards, or turned the game into a rough-and-tumble.

Above the clatter, however, arose the crisp, clear tones of Foxton:

"A heap of truth in what you say, Hank, and I guess I'd better call. There's your twenty-five, what have you got?"

Hank was just as unmindful of the interruption. As soon as the twenty-five dollars was on the table he strung out his cards, showing three jacks.

"Not good," said Frank. "I ought to have run the thing up a little higher, but somehow I'm always afraid to mention a very big sum on the gentle damsels, even if I've got three of them. As a rule, the sex is bad medicine for me. There they are, and I suppose they are good for the moderate sum on the board."

Kid Glove Hank bowed. He was actually cheerful over the fact that he had lost so much less than he might have done if he had been scientifically led along.

"And now, who is this gentleman?" continued Frank, as he drew in spoils and deck, and turned to the intruder, who had been eying the stakes with a longing look.

"He don't look much like a chief, but you can't most always sometimes tell."

"You can't prove it by me," responded Hank, pushing his chair back a trifle to settle himself for a steady stare.

"That's the disadvantage of your location here," went on Foxton.

"It's a blame sight harder to chuck a man of his side up the stairs than it would be to tumble him out of a window. If you have many callers of this kind I suppose you would prefer calling on the boys to help you carry out the corpses. Such cheek ought to make its own brass tombstone."

The stranger did not appear to be at all disconcerted by the gaze of the two players, or by the audible laugh of the spectators. Slowly he chinked his bag of dust and nuggets on the table, and stared, first at one and then at the other.

"I heered ye'r' wishin' fur a chief, an' I come beca'ise I thort yer might be men ov sand. Ez a stranger, Woolly Walker don't stick his nose a inch furder than he's wanted; but ez a chief at keyards he never takes a dar'! An' hyar's ther friends ez are willin' ter say he lays cl'ar over ary sport at Brace Box with deck and derringer. But, ef ye'r' 'fraid—I'm willin' ter go. Mebbe there's sport in this hyar burg. Ef ther' are, I'm goin' ter find it, or bu'st a wheel."

"So you're a chief, are you? If you are really in earnest, you are showing more pluck than brains. I am considered an average sort of player myself, but I don't generally call on two good men to pool their issues and rake me in, fresh as they call me. So, Mr. Woolly Walker, I suspect that you're nothing but a chump after all. Open out your buckskin, and if there's over a hundred in it, I'll meet you at any game you want, and let Hank come in on halves if he says so. There's nothing small about me."

"Mebbe not, 'ceptin' yer size. But ef yer mouth ain't ther biggest part of yer, I'm wide off. Toss 'round fur deal, my hearties. Uncle Woolly's all on board."

"How is it, Hank? Do you want to go along through the rifle, or will you lay by till I take the conceit out of this blower?"

"I was just thinking," retorted Hank.

"If you ain't pards, there's a heap of cheek in asking me to wait my game till you lose your stamps and mine. If you are, then it strikes me you're trying to rope me just where you say you've got him. I'm a 'commodat' orphan, but I don't just feel like lyin' back and keepin' still while my own throat is cut. For about a dollar I'd—"

Hank had been speaking freely—too freely, perhaps, for a man of peace; but he suddenly broke off in time to half smother the threat that was evidently at the end of his tongue.

"You'd what?" asked Woolly Walker.

"Speak it slow, now, an' name it mighty stiddy. Yer onderstands I'm a mighty old boss on ther war-path. I'd sooner gamble ner fight, yer onderstands, but ef one man er a dozen comes my way, he finds me all at home. Jest look at me, an' take me all in. I'm a white man, an' heavy accordin' ter my size."

Hank listened to the tirade without any sign that fuel was being added to the flame. A man with his reputation could afford to take it coolly while a stranger vaped.

Meanwhile, his eyes rested on Frank Foxton with what the latter could not fail to understand was a suspicious stare. When Woolly ceased speaking, he thought it about time to say something for himself.

"I must remark, Hank, that Brother Walker puts a heap of sense into his platform. At the same time, talk is cheap, and it's money you have to use when you want to buy land. There's your dollar; now let's see what you're going to do."

"Well, to tell the truth," retorted Hank, frankly, "I quit talking because I happened to remember that you were about a hundred ahead, and I want a chance to get my money back. Until I see that, perhaps it might be

just as well to let you check it a little and confine my attentions to this ring-tail roarer, who seems to want his jaw broke. Take your dollar back and I'll put him out for fifty cents."

Up to that moment Foxton had been possessed of the idea that if Woolly Walker was not a partner—and not a very silent one either—of Kid Glove Hank, that the latter knew very well who he was, and was willing to play into his hands.

The actions of the two men convinced him that he was mistaken.

Woolly had been drinking, perhaps, but he had all his wits about him, and as he rose from his chair and faced the proprietor of the Hole in the Ground it was not hard to see that if his skill and will answered to his build and general appearance Kid Glove Hank had quite an extensive contract on his hands.

"You understand I've been giving you a hint, I suppose?" continued Hank, slowly advancing, his hands held low down, but ready for a catch or a blow.

"Blame yer hints! I don't take 'em onless yer kin git 'em in with ther toe ov yer boot. I've come in hyar fur sport, an' ain't keerin' much what kind yer wants ter set up so yer comes fur me heavy. I'm Woolly Waker, ther owl with glass eyes an' limber legs. Hoot-toot-toot-toot!"

Walker closed with a pretty good imitation of the bird he named, smacked his hands together, and then ran in on Hank as the latter made a tigerish spring.

Locked in each other's arms the two swayed backward and forward, panting, straining, with now a twist, again a trip, and then a Herculean heave. Very much to their surprise the two found themselves so evenly matched that chance would have to decide which was to be called the better man.

By this time the Hole in the Ground was pretty well packed with its usual patrons who mustered in strong force that night, and with some outsiders who had rushed in about the time the report went out that there was trouble brewing at Hank's.

A dense ring was formed around the wrestlers, the spectators cheering to the echo their every move.

Both men were keeping their tempers remarkably well, and the crowd was encouraged by the fact. If it had seemed likely that one or the other would let go and begin to shoot, the spectators would not have been so anxious for a place in the front rank, and there would have been more glances to the rear to see if the avenues of retreat were still open.

At the beginning of the fray Frank Foxton moved a little to one side and dropped his hands into the side-pockets of his coat. He did not consider it his funeral, but he was willing to look on from the corner, though he felt that if Hank succeeded in putting out the stranger his own turn might come before very long. Meanwhile he had a chance to see a racket at the Hole in the Ground.

Gradually the two worked away and the crowd swung in, so that Foxton was left on the outside.

He could no longer see the contestants and was just about to spring upon a table, from whence he might obtain a better view of the proceedings when he heard some one almost at his side exclaim in a guarded tone:

"Thar's ther man!"

Then half a dozen men who had formed a little knot at the outskirts of the crowd, threw themselves silently and savagely on him.

Quick-witted as he was Frank knew they had come to slay.

CHAPTER VI.

MR. FOXTON GROWS TIRED.

As the man spoke he threw out his arms and embraced Foxton in a bear-like hug, at the same time endeavoring to lift him from his feet to fling him to the floor.

The hug was all right; it was powerful enough to almost crush an ordinary man—but as long as he retained his senses it took something more than pure strength to bring down Frank Foxton. He was quick as a cat, sinuous as a snake. Taken at a disadvantage as he had been he would not have despaired of the issue had his assailant been alone. When the gripe tightened on him his hands were on his derringers. If he could writhe around so as to bring one into line he intended to shoot from the pocket, for he felt sure that it was his life that was at stake.

This was only a thought, though. When, by a dexterous swing, he had evaded the effort to throw him, the other men were on him, while his arms were still pinioned tightly to his sides.

Foxton saw the rush, and that the foremost of the ruffians held a knife in his hand, the blade lying closely along his wrist and almost concealed.

As this man came within striking distance he thrust viciously, aiming the blow full at the jugular of the Fresh Sport.

The man who had seized Foxton understood the programme, since his gripe tightened still more as he attempted to hold the victim steady for the stroke. A man without resources would have been slain then and there.

Foxton had keen wit and plenty of nerve. He had been holding himself up; now he forced himself down so suddenly that he almost slipped from the clutch and nearly evaded the knife.

Not altogether, though.

The point of the keen blade slipped along the upper part of his skull, cutting a narrow gash, whose depth was only limited by the bone.

The blood came streaming out over his face, but he did not notice it in the excitement of the moment.

His right arm had worked free, and he had a chance at last.

Once, twice he promptly fired, first at the man with the knife, and then, with the muzzle of the double-barreled weapon resting against his chest, at the leader of the assault.

Neither shot was wasted, for the two men went down; but before he could turn the hand that held the derringer in the left pocket, four men were on him in a mass, striking sure and hard blows at him with knife and clubbed revolvers.

The gang were not cowards, at all events, for they had taken the desperate chance of being able to lay out Foxton without attracting attention from the contest between Kid Glove Hank and the tough who had handed in his card as Woolly Walker.

Bad as was the crowd who frequented the Hole, Foxton had to a certain extent become identified with the proprietor, and they would not have allowed such an attack without calling for a hand in the game. These men were entire strangers.

A blow from the butt of a revolver hurled Frank to the ground, and before he could even make an effort to recover, the work was well-nigh done.

He was nearly senseless, and no wonder. The heavy boots of the ruffians were brought into play. Under their desperate trampling it would not have been strange if they had kicked and stamped out his life. With his hands outstretched, his face and neck covered with blood, he lay, no sign of motion save in the nervously-twitching limbs.

The reports from his derringer had not attracted attention, but the fear that their revolvers might prevented the men from using them. It had been understood beforehand that they were to be saved for a last resort.

The man with the knife lay silent, his fingers stiffening round the haft, but the leader staggered to his feet, his hand pressed tightly against his bosom, and glared around him.

A single sweep of his eyes took in the whole situation.

"Ther dog's dead!" he growled, hoarsely.

"Mendez are done fur—leave his corpse an' look out fur yerselves."

At the command the men scattered as if by magic, and not a moment too soon.

A wild cheer arose above the dull thump that announced the fall of one of the wrestlers, and then Kid Glove Hank's clear voice was heard, cutting cleanly through the din:

"Make room there! I said he was to go, and out he goes; but he's the best man that ever I closed in with."

Woolly Walker was down on his back. In spite of his strength and skill, Hank had got a lock on him at last, and flung him to the floor with fearful force. As the crowd parted, making a lane to the door, Hank seized him by the collar and dragged him away on a run.

Along the full length of the saloon the heels of the senseless man rattled on the floor, and then on up the steps.

Into the gutter, or what served as such, Hank pitched him, returning then, with a cool and measured pace, pushing his way carelessly through the men who either thronged in his way, or were trying to get out.

It was then for the first time that the outsiders understood that another game had been in progress, and that very likely it would prove just as interesting.

The sharp crack of a pistol called the attention of every one to the further end, near the bar.

Frank Foxton was staggering to his feet, wiping the blood away from his eyes as he tried to see the result of the shot he had just taken. He did not often miss, but this time he was not so sure that his aim was true, since the blood, hastily wiped away, had once more blinded him a second before he pulled the trigger.

His suspicions proved to be correct, for the leader of the assassins had vanished.

"Hello! What's all this?" shouted Hank, as his eyes fell upon the single figure staggering forward from the corner at the end of the bar.

"Who's double-teamed you, pard, in my shebang?"

"There's one of the gang," responded Frank, pointing at the prone figure of Mendez.

"There was a round half-dozen, and if you can't throw Woolly Walker in to make a good count you may call me a Dutchman. When you tackled him they tackled me, and I'll bet a dollar I look like it."

Without further explanation Hank seemed to understand the idea.

"Here! Mike! Ben! Three or four of you freeze onto that woolly fraud. You'll find him

in the gutter where I slumped him. It would take a hand-wagon and six horses to get him away for the next half hour."

"Bet you a dollar he's not there now. The whole gang has skipped except this one poor galoot that I served. By the way—if you want to hold an inquest on him you'd better have it now. I'm an awful fellow for fun; but sometimes I have to pay for it the next morning. By to-morrow my head will be as big as a barrel and won't be fit to be seen in a Christian community."

And then he gave a short, hard laugh at his implied compliment to the company present.

Kid Glove Hank really appeared to be the more excited of the two.

"Take it easy, stranger. We'll get down to bed-rock in the matter before we quit. It's not often there's a peaceable outsider double-banked at the Hole in the Ground, and it's the first time they ever set up a game like this on me. I've heard of nerve; but this beats the gall of a cast-iron monkey."

"Yes, it does take the cake. I wouldn't have thought much of it if I had been slugged on the street, but to get in their work with a hundred men at their elbows, and none of them the wiser till the circus was over, speaks so well for Brace Box that I don't want to whisper another word."

"But, stranger," interrupted a bystander, "why ther blazes didn't yer sing out?"

"I'm not one of of the singing kind," remarked Frank, dryly.

"A man that don't take care of himself stands a pretty cold chance in these regions. Suppose you take a look at the fellow on the floor. If you know him you may be able to spot some of his pards for me. You point 'em out and I'll bring them down."

As Foxton suspected, it turned out that Mendez, as the leader had called him, was totally unknown in the room. The knife in his hand showed why he had been slain.

"All right, I didn't think any one here would be apt to place him, but it did no harm to try. He was one of the Black Eagles, I'll gamble a little on that."

"The Black Eagles?"

"Yes. The fellows that are collecting toll up the road. They were all here, right at your fingers ends, and like as not Woolly Walker was the chief of the outfit. I never thought of it before."

Various exclamations of surprise showed that the name was not altogether unfamiliar. Hank looked uneasily toward the door. It was time there was some news from outside, and he thought he heard the footsteps of his men on the stairs. If so they were coming empty-handed.

"No use, Hank. Your man has skipped the camp, and hasn't wasted much time in doing it. He looked mighty tired when you were dragging him out, but such fellows can rest up too quick. Jimmy Blair saw him going and some of his pards were with him, for there were half a dozen in the gang."

"That settles it; give me some water if you have such truck around the establishment. I want to wash up a little and then crawl off to bed. The joke is on me, but I don't mind saying those fellows understood their business, and did their work all the way and back again. I won't be able to move for a week when I once get anchored."

"But what is it all about?" asked Hank as he produced a basin and towel from under the bar and began to examine Foxton's injuries which were much more extensive than he had supposed.

"It's a swoop of the Black Eagles. I had some little trouble with them on the way, and the boss of the outfit thinks I have him spotted for future reference. Maybe he lives around here. Anyhow, it was about as close a call as I've had lately and the meanness of it was that they took me foul—didn't give me a chance to put in a word endways, so to speak, until they had almost finished their say-so. Thanks! You're a better man than I thought. If I stay 'round here I'll give you a call and will try and finish that game out. Just now I'm off for bed."

With considerable washing and a little bandaging he had become more presentable, though he looked bad enough as it was. Even Hank did not think it advisable to raise any objection, but gave him a hearty good-night, and an invitation to call again.

As Foxton reached the doorway he came upon a familiar face. Mr. Raleigh had gone out with Old Sirene for a few minutes' stroll before retiring, and in spite of the unsavory look and reputation of the place had entered the Hole in the Ground, attracted by the rumor and drift on the street. Something appeared to be going on there that was worth the seeing.

He did not get much further than the door, but when the crowd spread out after the ejection of Woolly Walker, he was one of the first who saw Fresh Frank rise from the floor, though he did not at first recognize him, beaten and bruised as he was and covered with blood.

When he saw the wonderful transformation that a little brushing and water assisted him to make, and the jaunty way he stepped off, after having endured enough to kill an average man,

he not only recognized the fresh little sport, but more than ever recognized the nerve and skill that made him an uncomfortable antagonist.

And in spite of the two-fold assistance Foxton had rendered his daughter, Mr. Raleigh scarcely knew whether to class him as friend or foe; though he had a strong suspicion that practically he was the latter.

Whichever way it was, Raleigh did not hesitate. He was indebted to Foxton, and until the debts were canceled, either by a return in kind, or by the open action of the sport, he did not intend to ignore the fact.

He stepped forward.

"I'm sorry I was not here in time to do any good," was the quiet remark.

"You seem to have had a pretty narrow squeak of it, but a miss is as good as a mile. Sirene and I were on our way back to Jimmy's, so I suppose you won't object to our company?"

"Thanks, Raleigh! I don't see how you can be in the way, and if I said no, I reckon you would come all the same. Catch on. I'm rather feeble, but I guess I can keep up with the rest of the procession. If I can't—don't bury me until you are sure I'm dead. Come along now."

Mr. Foxton was as genial and jovial as if he had not just been beaten almost to a mummy, and ruffled away with Raleigh and Old Sirene in his wake, followed by a good many admiring glances. The crowd at Hank's could appreciate a man of sand.

The fact was Frank had strung himself up to a high pitch for the benefit of the company; but as soon as he was out of sight he let himself down considerably.

"No use, Raleigh! If they chipped in now—and like as not they will before five rods—I'd have to throw up my hand and let them run the game. I'm nearer played than I've been for a month of Sundays. I tell you, it was touch and go. Like the interesting idiot that I can be on occasion, I was watching the wrong man."

He slackened his pace a little, and Raleigh at once slipped an arm into his. Without making any great show he was giving some assistance, and was ready to give more.

Hardly had he done so, however, when Foxton's hand on the other side came up with a jerk, and as the derringer it held struck something like a level the hammer fell and the report came.

Mr. Raleigh started back in some dismay, while Sirene drew his revolver with an aptness that showed he understood the beauty of quick work; yet neither of them saw the fitting shadow at which Frank had fired.

"Just as well, all around, that you and Sirene froze on," explained Frank.

"They wanted to give me one more shake and I guess they'd have made the ripple. I can't shoot for a cent and I'm all broke up. Put me in my little bed. Ah!"

Then the gay and festive Mr. Foxton hung on Raleigh's arm in a total collapse, and the two men had the pleasure of carrying him to the Bower Caravansary where he was a fixture in his room for about a week.

CHAPTER VII.

THE MAN WITH THE GUN.

"I GUESS I had a heap of fun at Hank's," remarked Foxton, to himself, as he sat on the porch some seven days later.

"The fact is, I generally find fun wherever I go, but in that underground retreat I got an extra bucketful, not down on my programme—and all because I took it into my fool head that Hank was in with the gang. Next time I'll have a little more sense. I've been expecting a call from friend Wilson while I was flat on my back, and if I didn't get it there must have been something more important in the wind, or else he caught onto the fact that I could still pick trigger, and was only giving myself a healthy little rest."

"And then there was the man with the shot-gun. I tell you, Raleigh's not a half-bad fellow, if he did skip out bag and baggage, including his pretty daughter! There's not one man in a hundred would have thought of it, but he wasn't taking any chances, and seems to have picked out a pretty honest fellow to watch at my window till I could look after myself. I hope that time has arrived; but it seems that I am going to have some trouble getting rid of my guard. And there the miserable old man of the sea is now. Shall I give him his discharge by word or boot, if he won't take it in any other shape; or shall I take him along? He'd be a terrible bother to take care of; but then he'd be an awful lot of comfort and company. We'll see what he has to say about the scheme. He looks real interesting, and that's a fact."

The soliloquy shows about what was the position of affairs when Mr. Foxton considered himself entirely recovered from his night of dissipation at the Hole in the Ground.

Raleigh had taken the opportunity to vanish. Indeed, it seemed to him quite providential, for he had been very seriously revolving the question of how he was to get rid of the Fresh Sport, in case that straight-shooting individual objected to being dropped out of the party. He had admired the nerve that had held the little man

together under the cowardly attack, but he was afraid both for himself and daughter. Foxton was handsome and full of resource; and Raleigh had reason to suspect had followed him thither with an intention of forcing himself into his affairs.

Accordingly, when he saw his chance, just when it was wanted, he quietly made his arrangements, leaving word with Mr. Bower that business called him unexpectedly away, but that he had procured a man he thought was reliable, to watch over his safety and care for his interests, though Bower forgot to deliver the message till the next morning.

The first thing Foxton saw or heard of this man was that night, when he was tossing uneasily on his bed, and exclaimed aloud:

"I wish to Heaven I had a drink of decent water! I'm just about choked, and don't feel strong enough to go on the hunt."

"Hyar's yer water, boss!" sounded in his ears a few moments later, very much to his surprise, and through the open window at the head of his bed was thrust a tin dipper.

"Many thanks," said Foxton, as he tossed down a mouthful, and then stopped to question the unknown.

"I was dry as a fish; but who the thunder are you?"

"Me? Oh, I'm Jones—old, Bob Jones—and I'm hyar with er shot-gun, lookin' after yer, which ther same a man by ther name ov Raleigh hired me ter do till he come back."

"Raleigh, eh! You're sure you got that name right? Perhaps he didn't tell you that I shoot quick; and probably you didn't know I had your head covered and finger on the trigger when you stuck your mug up at that hole in the wall."

"That's all right, that's all right! He hired me by ther month, an' I took them chances in ez part ov ther job. Ef it'll make yer feel easy yer kin ask Jimmy, an' he'll tell yer I'm solid ter tie to. Ef thar's ary thing else yer want you kin spit it out. Ef thar ain't, you better jest lie down ag'in an' go ter sleep. Thar won't any one come skirmishin' 'round while I'm hyar—bet yer bones! I'm lookin' out at night, an' you kin hoe yer own row by daylight."

"And what's become of Raleigh, by the way? He didn't say anything about leaving when he was in here this afternoon. I told him I would be out and around to-morrow."

"Reckon he's about ten mile on ther road at ther present speakin', an' he sez you or'tn'ter move fur a week. Nothin' like a good rest when a gent's bin all broke up. You kin do ez yer please, but I've drawed pay fur a month, an' fur a month you'll hev me 'round."

"Get out, you old sinner!" shouted Frank laughing in spite of himself, at the positive tone.

"You can watch that window to-night. If you see any one trying to get in, plug him. To-morrow I'll look you over and if you seem half white I won't object to having you around till I get on my feet. Confound it! I've got nerves if nobody does believe it, and it wears on them, sleeping with one eye open. I've been on the move for a year or two and it would do me good to sleep right through for a week. Good-night, old man. You keep your eyes open and I'll keep mine shut."

Mr. Bower, when applied to as reference, proved satisfactory; and Bob Jones, when examined by daylight, might have looked more disreputable without much effect. Foxton was accustomed to sizing up men, and without more than a glance decided that Jones would do. For three or four nights he slept more soundly and at length than he had for years.

At the end of that time he did not remember to have ever felt quite so well in his life, and decided that being abundantly able to take care of himself it was about time for Bob Jones to go.

He hinted as much on returning one night—looking out of the window to find Bob at his usual post of observation crouched up under the window, with the barrel of his shot-gun resting carelessly on his left forearm.

Jones retorted that he'd be blest—or something else—if he was going. That he had made a square contract and taken his pay in advance for a month. Until the expiration of the month he intended to stick closer than a brother.

"That's your say-so and I don't mean to argue about it to-night. You come around to-morrow, right after supper, and we'll talk it up. Bring your shot-gun—and if you intend to put on those favorite frills of yours you might as well bring along a coffin if you happen to have one handy in the house. By the way, have you got a horse?"

"A sorter one—toler'ble ter look at, an' number one ter go."

"Bring him along, too."

So it was that when Fred Foxton looked up from the porch and saw Bob Jones approaching, he also saw the shot-gun and the "sorter" horse.

"On time, are you? That's the style I like to see in men that hang about me. Do you see yonder mule?"

Jones squinted in the direction indicated; and could not well help seeing the animal, which

was duly caparisoned, ready for the road. He admitted that he did.

"That mule is just about starting on a journey somewhere near a thousand miles 'down south.' When your month is up you will be in the neighborhood of the middle of that journey. Are you sure you want to go along?"

"You goin' ter ride him?"

"If I don't nobody else can, and I don't calculate on his going without somebody on his back."

"Then I reckon I'll be in ther percesh' tell ther month's up," responded Jones, with something like a sigh. "It's tuff on me mother's oldest, but I ain't throwin' off on a man when I've onct took his money. I judge Mr. Raleigh are write, an' kin be relied on! He said he war payin' all expenses."

"You're a man to tie to, Robert, as you have several times remarked. Sure you will have no wailing wife or weeping children in the near future? I don't like to tempt a family man from the line of his duty."

"Nary. I'm ther hull, onadulterated fambly, b'iled down inter one."

"Then you can mount that mustang at your earliest convenience. I hadn't any idea of taking you along last night. In fact, I half expected to start you in an entirely different direction. But it begins to seem kind of natural to have you around, and as I can't get rid of you, I guess it's the best I can do. I'll be ready in a moment."

It was a pretty long moment; but Frank Foxton paid his bill, gathered his portables, and was out by the side of the mule in very prompt style.

Jones was seated sedately in his saddle, his face betraying no excitement.

"Ye'r sure you ain't leavin' no woman behind?" he inquired, as Foxton vaulted into his seat with all his usual ease and grace, and gathered up the reins.

"I'm like yourself; no kith nor kin."

"Then we're goin' ter find one. G'lang!"

The sorry-looking mustang struck into an easy lope, Foxton's mule went off at a trot, and the two spee ily vanished from the view of Jim Bower, who watched them from the porch, whereon Foxton had but a few moments before been so comfortably seated, with a look in his eyes that was half-wonder, half-disgust. He had unexpectedly lost a very good customer.

The two men were facing southward, and rode out of the camp in silence.

"Spect ter ketch up with ther kurnel soon?" asked Jones, at length breaking the silence.

"The colonel?"

"Yes. Kunnel Raleigh."

"The deuce is in you to ask such a question. Of course not. It's considerably doubtful if I ever see him again. If I hadn't struck a bad streak, I'd lay three to one against it, and I wouldn't mind taking even money, anyhow."

"How 'bout ther young lady?"

"Which young lady are those?"

"Ther kurnel's darter, ov course."

"She's in the same boat as her father. If I miss the one I'll hardly meet the other. And now, Mr. Jones, it will be necessary for you to place a button on those lips of yours—for the present, at least. If you are in shape for asking them on the way back, I wouldn't mind a reasonable few; but at present I don't know much more than you do, and that's enough, so don't ask questions."

Jones made a grimace, and then subsided. He had an idea that he had indicated their objective point in his questions, but doubted if it would be prudent to press them any further.

"Excuse me!" he retorted.

"I ain't askin' things fur fun, but ter see how ther land lays, so ez I kin git ther hang ov things all 'round. Mebbe I hedn't orter inquire whar we're goin' ter spend ther night. Fur a man ez hez jest bin sick, it won't do ter camp 'round too permiskus-like."

"I expect we'll pass a good share of the night in the saddle. I've got too much coin about to run many chances on the Black Eagle boys. I want to leave them well behind by the time morning dawns."

"Ye're o-u-t, then!" exclaimed Bob, hastily throwing up his shot-gun. "Thar they be, now!"

CHAPTER VIII.

AN UNSUSPECTED LISTENER.

"HOLD hard on that!" whispered Foxton, sharply, reaching over slightly to tap the knuckles of Mr. Jones with the barrel of his left hand derringer.

"When you come in with this party, you must hear him talk before you undertake to make it your say-so. Let's see what they're all about."

The mustang and the mule had stopped short at the original motion, or by this time they would undoubtedly have been discovered. So far the men who were taken for Black Eagles by Jones, seemed entirely unaware of their presence, and to tell the truth, they were so far off that it showed he had remarkably keen eyesight to have noticed them so promptly.

And then, they were going the other way, so

that the movement of the shot-gun was only one of instinct, and there was no real idea of shooting behind it.

"Oh, don't tear yer linen! Bobby Jones ain't ez green ez he looks. But when yer see them in ther distance, it's jest ez well ter be reddy ef any ov 'em turns up nearder on. I guess they ain't gunnin' fur us this time."

"I am not so sure of that, Robert. Besides, I owe them a great big one, and the boss of the outfit two or three. If they haven't spotted us, I must try and find out what they are up to. It may make a difference in the trail I will take. If they are going to travel on this, I would just as soon take some other, unless we could surround them, and start off on the other side."

While he spoke Foxton was slowly backing Rhadamanthus from the track, and Jones followed copy without arguing. It only required a few steps to take them out of chance of sight.

"Now, hold them here till I go on and see what is the racket. When a man has such luck as we had it means that he must follow the streak and see where it comes out at. This is a miss or hit sort of a game that I'm playing anyhow, and one thing is about as good as another."

Foxton dismounted as he spoke, threw the reins to his companion, and without further explanation glided away.

If things were as they seemed in that one brief glance it would not be hard to learn something of the men whom he was almost certain he recognized as some of the Black Eagles.

They were masked, as was usual with them when upon the road, and evidently had no suspicions whatever that their movements were observed, since they were leisurely filing off from the trail, and one by one were being lost in the canopy of branches that offered them a retreat.

From the conformation of the ground Frank was led to believe that they were about to camp in a little dingle—perhaps for the night, or, more likely, until the time arrived for some stroke of business.

"Cool hands they are," he thought; "but that's the way they love. Hope they won't send an outpost forward and stumble on Jones—at least till I get through with my observations. It might make the rest look around too preternatural sharp."

It was just about sundown, which might account for the Black Eagles' sight having been less keen than usual. The light, what there was of it, had been in favor of the two wayfarers; and the semi-darkness was in Foxton's favor now. First, he had a chance to note the probable route he had selected; by the time he was done guessing it out the rapidly increasing darkness gave him a better chance to follow it without detection.

He was cautious but quick. Sooner than he had expected the low hum of voices came to his ears, warning him that he was not far off from the objects of his search.

He had made no mistake about the conformation of the ground, and looking downward could now see a faint glimmer of light in the clump of trees that occupied the little hollow.

Satisfied that he could not hear enough from his present position to furnish information worth his risk he at once decided to run more risk for a better location, and began skirting the edge of the amphitheater.

Having reached the southern side he found that nothing could be better for his purpose. A thicket ran right down the face of the bank, enabling him to approach the talkers under cover.

Of course there was a risk of being heard, for men like the Black Eagles have sharp ears; but Foxton was willing to run the risk, unpleasant as the journey was.

The distance was not great, but it took some time to pierce the thicket. When, at last, he found himself on the outer edge the conversation became quite audible in spite of the fact that it was carried on in low tones.

"I never heard his voice before," was Frank's first thought, "but it's the Comstock to a gopher hole that its the Mexican friend of the Captain of the Black Eagles. I wish they would move around a little, so as to give me a chance at their faces."

As if in obedience to this wish one of the men—for there were but two conversing—lit a cigarette.

The flame of the match, lasting as it did for only a few seconds, gave the opportunity of seeing the face of the smoker, and it was the face of the Mexican, who, after a couple of nervous puffs said:

"He has, then, what you call cleared out. I have been away on what you call business, and I trusted you to keep an eye on him. By this time he is beyond present pursuit. What have you been doing that he should escape you so easily?"

"Nursing myself up like a good little youth ought to when he's got a hole in his shoulder and a broken rib. Confound him! Sick or well, drunk or sober, up or down, above ground or below it, he has as many lives as an old cat, and is just as good a man as they make 'em! He's got away with me twice, now, and that's more than any other living man on this footstool can

say. The third time would be the charm. Some one would go over the divide, and I'm not so sure it would not be me. I think, if he'll let me alone I'll let him alone, till I have the time to give him my whole attention."

"Of who do you speak, what man do you mean? Though I think I can guess."

"Your confounded Fresh Frank. We put up a job to do him right in town. Big Fred has been wanting a fly with Hank for some time, to show the boys what he can do, so I put him at him right in the Hole in the Ground. While the fun was highest a half dozen of us mounted your cinnamon-scented young sport."

"Bravely done. But the end?"

The captain was a little slow about finishing his story. In spite of the comical side he was trying to show the affair was not pleasant to explain.

After a little pause:

"The end? Well, that was short and sweet. Hank got away with Fred, as I would have bet even money at the start; and Mr. Fred Foxton got away with us."

"Caramba!"

"Well, yes. It's a thing to swear over; but that don't do much good. I'm the most presentable of the boys that were in it, and I'm carrying a shoulder with a hole in it. Perhaps it's early to mention it, but we've left to you the loving task of erecting a tombstone to the memory of Senor Mendez. The kids request you to have inscribed on it, 'Died suddenly, at the post of duty.'"

The Mexican gave a growl of disgust.

"What do I know or care about your ruffians—if they don't succeed? This man has gone on with them, then. So much the worse."

"Oh, no. Where we got gruel by the bucket he must have swallowed some by the spoon. He's been taking a *siesta* ever since, with a queer old fish by the name of Jones on guard at his window. We were making arrangements to kill them both to-night, when I got your call for a conference. Then I figured it up, and decided that I didn't want any more of his in mine—not for the present. What I do want is a thousand cash, to square the old account. Then, if you've anything new to propose, I'll be willing to listen."

"I have brought you the thousand—Raimondo never fails. But nothing new have I to propose. Work can be had cheaper where he is going, and they never fail—those men of the knife. I will rely on home talent."

"Exactly. You have a good class of laborers in the neighborhood, and don't care to see the market flooded with more of the same sort. You think the Black Eagles would not be an acquisition. Perhaps you are right. If we should come, however, you want to treat us well, or hire an army."

"I am plain spoken, too. I care not to see the Eagles there; but their captain will be ever welcome."

"And will, no doubt, be made a high-cock-alorum in the charming circle of society that surrounds the Carjador Hacienda. Senorita Banzos, for instance! Would she not be charmed to meet such a warrior bold, even without his army at his heels?"

"Carajo! How know you anything of Madeleine Banzos?"

"How did I know anything of Edward Raleigh, or the fresh Mr. Foxton? A little bird must have told me. When I do arrive, look out that the birds are high enough. I might be found on the other side."

"There is no other side. Man alive! The young lady you mention is my—my—ward, as you Americans call it. Dare to harm her—dare even to threaten harm to her and I will slay you where you stand!"

"Oh, don't slop over into high jinks. Some other evening, perhaps, but it won't be this evening. The boys are looking after that now. Just squint your eyes in that direction and note how the firearms glisten, and two or three of them pointing this way. Oh, I know you would just as soon I would retire. You can be a very desperate man, but let me give you one little piece of advice. Hereafter, do your own work, or don't try to go back on your partners."

"And when the partners, as you call them, take all the gold of the concern and fail to do their work there's nothing to think of but—this."

The Mexican tapped his waist significantly, and his fingers touched the haft of the knife in his girdle. He did not seem alarmed, in spite of the odds against him, and the watcher under the boughs could not help but admire the cold scorn with which he faced the outlaw captain.

The chief of the Black Eagles was just as cool. With his hands he carelessly threw back the lapels of his coat, exposing his broad breast.

"There's a place to fit it, right there, and the sooner you quit talk and attempt business the sooner we will find out which is the best man. We've been in the business once or twice before this, and I don't remember ever yet asking for the last payment until the work was finished. If you think I haven't played you fair in this, get even as quick as you can."

The words seemed to call the other to his senses.

"Forgive me," he said, frankly, holding out his hand.

"I do not believe that my old-time friend would treat me unfairly, but the disappointment has been great, and to mention my family affairs puts me beside myself. Take my hand and forget."

"Don Raimondo Carjador, I don't know of a whiter pard than you are—when your head is clear. It struck me you were a little off your base in the opening of this conversation, and I thought I'd keep back an important fact until the wind-up, to see if you were the sort that was entitled to it. I guess, maybe, you are, though it's an awful temptation. There's more money in it than you've given, and perhaps as much as you'd care to pile up in the hand of yours truly."

Wilson was holding the hand of the Don in his own, and if there had been light enough would have been looking him straight in the eyes. He was quick and shrewd to find out the value of things, and he had an idea that this thing he spoke of was worth as much as he had hinted."

"In the name of the saints, what is it?" Raimondo did not seem much excited, though he could not help but feel a curiosity. Wilson meant something, if it was only a practical joke.

"And you will pay me what it is worth if I open out?"

"Certainly. Did I ever refuse?"

"Ahem! Your jobs don't seem so important when you are making the contract; but somehow, when the contract is closed, and you begin to break ground, they pan out immense."

"Speak, man! I have not time for folly. By morning I must be far from here."

"Well, of course, when I raked in Raleigh I also got away with his luggage. Not metaphorically, but in actual fact."

"I found it important as a collection of documents, if not overcrowded with actual wealth. Among other papers was the original grant for the Guadana purchasa. Also, others bearing on the same subject. Raleigh might get along without them if they have not been filed as of matter of record; but if they turned up in the hands of another party who had brains you can see yourself how it would be."

There was no mistaking the fact that Raimondo gave a start before he drew his hand hastily away.

"The Guadana grant? I knew not till the other day that you had ever heard of it; I can see where you got your information. Without these papers you think—"

"That his teeth would be drawn? Yes. And with them in your hands the bonanza, if there is one, would be ours. He may have bought the grant, but we hold the deed."

"Let me see these papers, then. If they are so important you may ask what you choose for them."

"I've suggested my price, and you can take a little time to revolve the matter. Of course I don't carry such valuables with me, and we could hardly reach the *cache* to-night. Besides, I will be the more welcome when I bring the package to the hacienda, where we can look it over at our leisure."

The captain's banter had a dead earnest behind it that Raimondo understood. Whether or no he really believed that the outlaw was telling the truth in regard to the absence of the grant, he appeared to take the statement as a matter of fact, and said quite coolly:

"Until that time, then, we will consider what we can make out of it. Yet it must not be long. The American is in earnest. He is also on the way. I must meet him—how, I will know better when our plans are laid."

"Oh, I'll be after you to-morrow. I'd go along with you to-night but there's a matter of professional work on the carpet that has an encouraging look, and we will have to finish it up. We intended to look after Foxton, too, but that can wait."

"Before you go I want a little more information about the ins and outs of the country. You can guess pretty well the route Raleigh has taken; suppose you post me up on it. I've never been down that way but once, and you know there's a good many ways to the woods."

Raimondo settled himself back quite coolly, and responded without hesitation to the questioning of the captain. He told enough about the country to show that he was up on local geography; and a great deal more than he would have cared to tell if he had suspected that Frank Foxton was receiving the benefit of it. The conversation lasted for fully half an hour.

Then Raimondo rose.

"I have been disappointed, but it is best for old friends not to quarrel. This may all turn out for the best, though time would have been saved if you had told me the other day about the Guadana grant."

"But, my dear Carjador, I wanted to get an offer first from the other party."

"Ah, and he offered, how much?"

"Not a cent, to speak frankly. He has the nerve of a sand-burr. As it was only curiosity—for the present, at least—that made no difference. Now then, unless you want to help

hold up a hearse, you had better be going. Our time here is about up, and I don't think you care to ride on the war-path with the Black Eagles."

Raimondo Carjador certainly did not. Conscience would not have hindered him; but, though he was willing to use the gang for his own purposes he was rather above being a road-agent, as long as he had a chance for something better. At this hint he lingered no longer. He said good-night shortly, mounted his horse without a word to the men he passed on his way to the animal, and the captain could hear him clattering off along the road that led to Brace Box, as though his time was valuable.

"What a thundering scoundrel he is," said the road-agent, aloud.

"He used to be a bad man from 'way back when I knew him in the States, and prosperity hasn't hurt him a bit. Wonder if I didn't make a mistake in telling him about the papers for that old grant?"

"You bet you did," whispered a voice gently in his ear, while at the same time, or a second or two precedent, the barrel of a heavy derringer came boring into his ear.

"They won't be safe a holy minute in your keeping after this, so I'm going to relieve you. Keep silent now, and shell out."

CHAPTER IX.

THE FRESH SPORT BEGINS TO GET EVEN.

CAPTAIN WILSON, to give him the name he went by when personally addressed in Brace Box, was heartily ashamed of the way he had been caught napping.

Some men would have made a quick catch for the pistols that rested so handily in his belt—and would have been perforated accordingly. He reasoned very rapidly when he heard that voice, and about made up his mind that the man who could so successfully get the drop before his presence was suspected would probably be sharp enough to hold the advantage or shoot to kill if needs be.

The captain temporized, but without making any unnecessary noise.

"You infernal idiot! Who are you, and what do you want? Don't you hear the boys over yonder? Don't you know that it only takes a loud word to bring them here?"

"I hope the loud word will not be spoken," was the cool response. "Somehow, by nature, I am squeamish about wholesale slaughter, and as your gang would sooner stay than run, I would be under the disagreeable necessity of shooting them all. I suppose you recognize me by this time. I am Frank Foxton, anyhow. You may fool the Don, but it won't go down with me. You can retain your wealth, but that wallet of papers that was in your breast pocket belongs to me as much as it does to you. If I find, on looking it over, that there is anything peculiarly your own I'll send it back. I'm only interested in the Guadana bonanza."

By the time Foxton was done speaking he was in possession of the wallet he had mentioned. The darkness favored him. With the skill of an expert the papers passed into his possession before the captain was aware of their loss. Wilson was too much occupied with wondering how to most safely best this cool sport to note the one suspicious movement of Frank Foxton's left hand.

"So you've been listening, have you?" growled the captain, still in an undertone.

"Chalk down that one truth, in big red letters. Listening to every word; and I didn't hear anything new, either. I knew that Carjador was a rascal from the moment I saw him with you, back at Brace Box; and the reputation of the chief of the Black Eagles is too well-known to need mention. Much obliged, however, for the shape your information comes in. I think it can be made all the more generally available."

"Why, blast your cold pictures, do you think you'll ever get out of here *alive*?"

Unconsciously the captain in his indignation raised his voice a little.

"Softly, now. Of course I do, or you would have been a corpse long before this. You've taken the advantage of me twice, but the third time is the charm. I have it now and I mean to play it for all it's worth or else see that the game between you and me is closed right now and forever. Are you going to play to my lead, or ar'n't you? Speak quick and speak easy. If you're not I'll play the other way. It's Fresh Frank that's talking, without a bluff but just on the strength of his hand."

"You're fresh and frank, I'll be hanged if you're not! You've got the reputation of always being as good as your word or I would have tried you a rustle before this. But the thing can't last forever and the wonder is that some of the boys haven't been poking along before this."

"So they would have been if I had tried to rush matters. And then there would have been shouting, shooting and all that sort of foolishness. But everything is going along as straight as a string. That's the beauty of having the boys under discipline. They don't intrude till they're called on. You and I will go away together till we get out of earshot."

Then I'll turn you loose and you'll come back without any one being the wiser. After that the game will go on as before—each of us will play the hand he happens to hold when we meet again. I'm giving you all the chances I can afford, and if that don't strike you as about the square thing, why, so much the worse for you. I'll kill you now."

Very pleasantly spoke Mr. Foxton and yet he meant the whole of it, as Captain Wilson was thoroughly satisfied. He was responsible for two attempts on the life of the sport, and three men out of the four would not hesitate under the circumstances to slay him without mercy. Frank Foxton's reputation for truth, veracity, skill with deadly weapons, and cold courage stood him in very good stead just then.

"My hands are up, Foxton, and I'll follow if you promise fair that you mean all you say; but I won't say I won't kick if I see the chance, or that the boys won't chip if they drop to your little game. One of us may be dead before you get out of this hole. If not I'll swear some one will drop the next time we meet."

"That's all right, that's all right! You wouldn't be yourself if you didn't say so. But just now we're talking about something else. You observe, the least crook of my finger and down you go?"

"You bet I'm observing. It's what's been holding me steady."

"Then continue to observe, and step out straight for the bushes. Don't go to slinking, but walk as though you were walking. If any of the boys turn up I'll tell you what to say."

Foxton knew well enough that he had never been in the shadow of much greater danger. He did not want to kill this outlaw in cold blood, much as he had cause to hate him. If any of the men turned up, were it only to ask a question, something of that kind would have to be done, and even then the chance of escape would be very uncertain.

He was taking the risk, however, believing that Wilson would be far enough from the men on the other side of the leafy screen to prevent more than the hum of voices reaching their ears. Probably the captain had indicated that he wanted no one prying around; and if so, they would not approach unless they heard some suspicious sound. They had heard the buzz of conversation so long during the presence of Carjador that its continuance would seem only a matter of course.

Such ideas as these were in Mr. Foxton's brain, but he hardly gave them such definite shape as, derringer in hand, he leisurely followed his prisoner out of the little dingle. A few steps and they were enveloped in darkness.

Yet Foxton's left hand was on the captain's shoulder, his derringer at his ear, so that a movement could not be made without his being aware that it was coming. In whispers the course was laid out, and Foxton was as careful now as he had been seemingly careless before. The time of actual danger was just at hand.

The work was a little slow, but Foxton and Foxton's good luck made it sure. In less time than he had thought possible Frank heard the hammers of the shot-gun belonging to Bob Jones go back. As he went away single, and was coming back in double harness he heard a low, warning hail.

"What in blazes?"

The exclamation was a mild one considering the situation when the outlaw tramped out of the bushes with a derringer at his ear, and Frank Foxton behind the derringer.

"Don't swear, pard, it might break the luck, and I don't want that, for it's just been running 'way up. Get the animals ready, for, in about ten seconds after I turn this lion loose, we want to be breaking for Brace Box at the rate of a mile a minute."

"Why don't yer take him along? Brace Box 'ud jest shout ter see him, an' Kid Glove Hank—oh, he's dyin' ter shake hands."

"That's all right, but a promise is a promise. I said I'd turn him out to shake his heels, and the only thing to do is to keep my word and swing foot lively."

"He hits the turn when he strings his chips along that way," said Wilson, as he coolly flung himself down on the turf. As Frank had relieved him of his weapons he was not ready for anything else.

"There's no other man living could have taken me out of my camp the way he has done, but I figured it down fine and made up my mind I'd sooner be kicking my heels around to-morrow than lay cold to-night. When the Fresh Sport holds the drop and talks biz you may as well come down if you've got nothing better to do."

"Glad you take it so easy," retorted Foxton as he crawled on Rhadamanthus.

"I've given you a square show, and want to treat you white clean through. Don't howl too soon or too loud and you'll have an elegant chance to make things comfortable for me in the near hereafter. Ta, ta! My headquarters are with Jimmy Bower and I'll be glad to see you in Brace Box."

Before the outlaw could guess that he was going Foxton had touched spurs to his mule, and was off like a shot, with Jones at his side.

"Shows what it is to have a good reputation," laughed Frank, as they dashed away.

"Got off with him, bag and baggage. The biggest chief I ever saw don't want to die if there's another turn in the box and nobody looking on to see him take water."

"Reckon you ain't goin' ter talk about it in Brace Box though?" asked Robert.

"Brace Box, thunder! When that interesting burg sees me again it will be after to-night. We've got to surround this outfit and make a straight shoot south. If he don't yell too soon we can do it just as easy. The Black Eagles have business on hand to-night, and won't throw away a chance for good money following too far after us if they think we're going into town."

"Hev yer own way, I'm hired by ther month. It 'pears ter me, though, ez if he war shoutin' now."

Sure enough, a sharp whistle rung out on the night air. In the silence of the shadows it could be heard a mile.

"Let him shout, we make the turn right here, and unless they take some cut-off that I don't know anything about it's ten lemons to a gooseberry that they don't get any nearer to-night."

He turned the head of his mule as he spoke and led the way into a narrow trail that branched off from the main one, leading away to the southwest.

Whether it was that the doubling back deceived them, or that, as Foxton had said, their business engagements detained them, Captain Wilson and his Black Eagles were seen no more that night.

CHAPTER X.

THE FACE BY THE FIRELIGHT.

RHODA RALEIGH had not been quite so heartless as Frank Foxton might have supposed. She went away without bidding him good-by; but not before assuring herself by a quiet peep, while he was sleeping, that he was in no particular danger.

Moreover, it was at her suggestion that the services of a guard were procured, to look after his safety at night.

Mr. Raleigh would gladly enough have dispensed with his daughter's company, had she remained within the limits of civilization; but he rather preferred taking her along to leaving her installed as nurse to the fresh young sport. When she insisted that Jones should be engaged he could only yield. When that had been done she was ready to accompany him without question. The rough experience of the ways and wiles of this out-of-the-way region had not frightened her from her purpose—of which, by the way, her father knew but little.

In return for her lack of confidence Mr. Raleigh gave her just as little information as to his plans as he could.

Rhoda was prudence itself, and there did not seem much likelihood of her finding any one to whom she would make an undesirable revelation, yet after her first declaration that she would go along, Raleigh was reticence itself. When he found her thrown so very confidentially into Frank Foxton's company he was especially glad of his reticence.

It was about sundown the second day out from Brace Box. The loveliness of the afternoon just passed had been intense. Not a human being had been met, and scarcely a living creature. As it was understood that they were to camp for the night at a spring some indefinite distance ahead, Rhoda might have been pardoned for showing fatigue or nervousness when the ambulance continued to grind along long after the hour when she was accustomed to take her supper.

Her father seemed moody and Old Sirene much less talkative than usual. Neither was supplying unasked-for information; and however much Miss Raleigh would have liked to know what sort of camping-ground they were to have, and what were its advantages and dangers, she asked no questions, but remained as silent as the other two.

It was something of a surprise, and considerable of a shock when, from the gloom ahead, there rung out a sharp voice:

"Halt! Who comes thar?"

"Good!" was the major's answer.

"Glad to see you've commenced by having your eyes open and everything shipshape. Is that you, Destiny Dave?"

"It's what luck an' hard livin' hes left ov me. I jedge it's Major Raleigh thet's talkin' but I don't see ez straight ez I mout. Sp'ose yer jist step forrads mighty keeful an' considerin' thet thar's a peck ov lead p'inted an' all ready to come your way."

"Nothing like carrying things through according to rule," laughed Raleigh as he stepped forward with his hands up, to satisfy the sentinel.

A few words of conversation in a low tone appeared to be satisfactory to both, for the major came briskly back and sprung into the coveyance.

"Whip them up Si. It's a long half-mile to the spring and I would like to get there before daylight goes entirely."

Sirene gave a grunt and applied the braid. He

was anxious to get to the camping-ground himself.

Quite romantic it looked to Rhoda when she saw the fitful flashing of the fires some little distance ahead. This meeting with an army was unexpected, though it gave her a welcome feeling of safety, even if the main body appeared somewhat careless.

As the ambulance halted a number of figures came clustering around, but only one stepped forward to greet the major.

"Destiny Dave, he reckoned you'd be 'round 'bout sundown ter-night. Guess yer met him back on ther trail. He's bent on keepin' a guard out, an' ez thar warn't nobody else anxious he went hisself. I does think it ain't no great use throwin' pickets out much afore midnight. Thar's two men down there south-ways, which orter hold everything level."

Safe enough for the present, but it's no harm done keeping a sharp lookout," said Raleigh, shaking the outstretched hand.

"I want to get things in shape for the night, and a mouthful of supper. Then I'll be ready to talk things over. There have been some developments. Dave will be in in an hour, and perhaps it would be better if some one relieved him. I am not sure, but it is very likely that I have been followed, and though there might be no danger of an attack on the camp, or any other immediate harm, still, I'd like to know if we had any undesirable neighbors."

While Raleigh was conversing Sirene was busy. A couple of the loungers had relieved him of his mules, and were staking them out, while he had appropriated a side of one of the camp-fires, and was preparing supper.

For the present Rhoda retained her seat and watched the scene. She had been in the camp of a band of outlaws, and had to confess that this looked a good deal like it, though there was a comfortable difference. She was a prisoner there, while here she was a guest; and she had every confidence that her father could only be engaged in some legitimate enterprise, little as he had explained to her the particulars.

The ambulance made a tolerably comfortable home, if the accommodations were somewhat contracted. Though tired with the long journey of the day she did not feel like leaving, at least, till her father was ready to serve as her escort around the camp.

Sirene's style of cooking was primitive but substantial. In a very little while he served up an excellent supper, and after that Rhoda had the chance she was waiting for, to inspect the camp under her father's guidance.

Quite in military shape she found it, now that darkness had actually set in. The ambulance was about the center where the man on guard in camp could keep an eye on it at all times during his vigil. Another sentinel kept watch over the horses and mules. The men were all heavily armed, and seemed to be of the rough and ready class; though perfectly respectful in their demeanor in her presence.

"Something of a surprise to you, I suppose," said the major, waving his hand toward the men who were again clustered near the fires, smoking their evening pipes and conversing in low tones.

"I have said but little to you in regard to the object of the trip and I heartily wish I had said less. If I had thought that the announcement of business in Mexico would have led to your coming along I certainly should have kept silent. Why under the sun you should be anxious to risk the hardships and dangers of the trip is more than I can understand."

"Well, father mine, the fact is that we have both been rather reticent. You said you were going to Mexico; and I said that I was going along. Probably I have certain unspoken reasons, also."

"What possible reason can you have for visiting the heaven-forsaken region, through which I expect to pass?"

"What do you want there yourself? You had a pretty large field of usefulness as it was. I should judge that this expedition has cost you a pretty little fortune already; and as you made it all in the last few years, you seemed to be doing well enough where you were, without tempting fate here."

"Nonsense! What were the few thousands I had slowly raked together? This has a fortune in it that is worth the possessing. A thousand times a thousand—perhaps millions are in it."

"I am not presuming to dictate, or to question your judgment, so there is no use for us to quarrel. I have long had a fancy to visit the very portion of Mexico whither you are going, and when I saw the opportunity I could not resist the temptation. Certainly I could never go in better company."

She spoke lightly, but her joking manner did not have much effect in dispelling her father's ill humor. He looked at her keenly, though he could only see the outline of her face.

"I hope that Frank Foxton has nothing to do with this very inconvenient desire."

"Mr. Foxton? What an idea! Until a few days ago I did not know that there was such a person in the universe."

"Nevertheless, you found yourself on confidential terms with him in a remarkably brief

time; and he spoke as though it was his intention to journey in the same direction as ourselves. To say the least, it looks suspicious."

"Of course it does, and it relieves my mind mightily when you growl about the gloomy prospects ahead. We have the chance of meeting him in the sweet by and by. From what you say, and what I have seen, he is a valuable man to have about. I only wish he was here now, and wonder that you did not make an effort to attach him to your party. It would have been worth your while to wait a week rather than lose him."

"My child, it's all right to catch a Tartar, in the way of war; but it's all wrong when the Tartar catches you. This Fresh Frank is a Tartar. I do not fear that, of himself, he could seriously interfere with my business; but he could be a very dangerous man if he tried, and struck up a partnership with those that I know of."

"With the Black Eagles, for instance? But then, after the little I have seen of them, I have my doubts if any sort of partnership could be patched up between them."

"Perhaps not. And yet he is scarcely making this trip alone, unless it is a preliminary to spy out the land."

"But I thought you said that he was following you? I am hoping, perhaps again hope, that he is. When the dangers that you talk of are around, I want Mr. Foxton to be around with them. Now, let us talk of something else. I am tired enough to be yearning for rest and sleep, and this stuff grows monotonous. How many days' journey is our destination away?"

"I can hardly tell. If we travel fast, and our journey is uninterrupted, it may be but a few days. Yet it is possible that we may be weeks on the way. I will perhaps have a better idea when Destiny Dave comes in. He is the guide for the expedition, and I trust largely in his judgment. He should be here soon. Perhaps you had better go back to the ambulance. I do not wish you to run any risks until we are better acquainted with our men."

The little stroll they had taken relieved the cramped feeling caused by the long ride of the day, and Rhoda began to feel honestly tired. The advice of her father was not hard to take and when she stretched herself upon a long seat that served as her bed by night, and tucked a soft pillow under her head, the restful feeling was delicious. She closed her eyes to enjoy it, and before she was aware that she was sleepy, consciousness was lost in slumber.

When her eyelids raised again it was long after midnight.

The camp-fires had burned low, only an occasional flicker showing where they had been. All around her was silent, and as far as the ambulance was concerned she was alone. She listened a moment to catch the breathing of the major, whose place was on the opposite seat. He was usually not a very light sleeper.

When she could not hear the long-drawn breathing, as she expected, Rhoda felt a little thrill of apprehension.

Another moment of thought reassured her, however.

Probably Destiny Dave had delayed his coming, and either the major was now conferring with him, or had gone to seek him. The idea of there being anything to fear was simply ridiculous.

Yet in spite of the fact that she could hear no sound she was conscious of a presence. Her nervous suspense grew beyond bearing. Slowly she rose to peer out under the curtain and at that moment the fire gave a higher flicker than usual, sending a faint stream of light into the vehicle, and slanting as it came across a dark, fierce face but a few feet from her. It was a scarred face, a painted face, the face of an Indian.

CHAPTER XI.

FOUND AGAIN.

RHODA was not much given to nerves so she did not scream, unexpected as was the sight that had met her eyes. There was only a momentary glance of that savage face, for the fire died down as rapidly as it had risen, and in the darkness she could see no more and the only sound was the click of her revolver as she forced the hammer back.

"Big Injun me; big friend, heap big; white girl go slow, hear what Rattlesnake say. Speak low."

The voice came after a moment's interval, in a thick, guttural whisper; and the head had evidently been withdrawn from its close proximity to her own.

"Who are you; what do you want?"

Rhoda, under the circumstances, was inclined to think that the best plan for her was to follow his advice. She spoke low, but firmly; and held her revolver ready. Since the affair with the road-agents she prepared for action at once in all doubtful cases and did not intend to delay too long going into action.

"Me Rattlesnake, big chief. Hear what white man talk. See white girl. Heap sorry. Bad men in way. Make big trouble. Keep eye open. Much fight. Much blood. No get gold, mebbe. Heap silver, though. Keep eye

open an' look fer Rattlesnake. He be 'round, big chief on wheels."

It was evident that the chief had been among the whites a good deal. Though his sentences were short he spoke plainly, and Rhoda had no difficulty in comprehending his meaning. She had ceased to feel any great alarm; but she was fairly puzzled.

"I am much obliged to you, Mr. Rattlesnake, for your information and good wishes, but I don't understand why you should concern yourself about my danger, or my father's success. Are all of your tribe so tender-hearted?"

The Indian shook his head.

"Rattlesnake beap friend father. He save life of Rattlesnake father heap moons past, when him big medicine. Squaw not know; Rattlesnake know. Tribe fight for bad men; Rattlesnake hate bad men. Want git even. You trust every time; no git left. You tell white men keep eyes peeled; keep eyes wide open—all get scooped. White man come, you tell what Rattlesnake say. So long. See you bineby soon."

Without waiting for an answer the Indian slipped away as noiselessly as he had come, not another sleeper in camp having been disturbed. Rhoda listening could hear nothing of him, though she did hear the sound of approaching footsteps—Destiny Dave and her father, who had just finished a conference outside of the camp.

They separated as she looked out at them, and Major Raleigh came directly toward the ambulance.

A movement made by Rhoda showed that she was not asleep, and he spoke somewhat anxiously:

"I hope you have not been alarmed. Dave and I were talking over the journey. He will have to change his route a little, on account of your presence, which had not originally been counted on. Of course, with the men around you, there could be no occasion for fear."

"I am hardly one of the fearful kind or I would not have been here. Besides I had a visitor. His cheerful conversation would of itself have been sufficient to allay any nervousness I might feel on account of my peculiar position."

"A visitor!"

Edward Raleigh showed both surprise and anger at hearing this intelligence. If his men were intruding so early in the march they might give trouble enough later on.

"Yes, a gentleman who styled himself Mr. Rattlesnake. After all, he was more earnest than amusing."

"Which one of the men was it?" asked Raleigh, sharply.

"Would you know him again? What did he look like?"

"Very much like a full-blooded Indian. He styled himself a mighty chief, and I have no reason to disbelieve his word."

"Then he was not one of our men at all. Did the boys not see him? How did he get into the camp?"

"They did not seem to see him either come or go; and he left word for you that if you did not keep better watch you would all be 'scooped in.' He was very friendly, and, I should judge, a man of solid sense."

"But what did he want; how came he to speak to you?"

"He was anxious to scatter good advice around. As we never met before I could not well imagine that I fascinated him."

Then, dropping her tone of badinage Rhoda told the particulars of her little adventure, including the very words of the chief, so far as she could remember them; winding up with:

"So you see that I have found out something of what you have in view, in spite of your silence. It's a mine you are after; one of those remarkable bonanzas, that will draw men by the hundreds, away from peace and plenty to starvation in the wilderness. I can see beforehand that the result will be failure, even if no worse. If I had not my reasons—foolish, girlish reasons they are—and were it not that I have all of your obstinacy of purpose when I have once started out, I would beg you to go back even now, and at the sacrifice of the time and money you have wasted on the scheme."

The major was troubled on two accounts.

In spite of Rhoda's explanation, he could not understand the object of the Indian in entering his camp. Were his words for good or ill?

Her warning worried him also. It put in shape the more than doubts that had been agitating his own mind. He was willing to take desperate chances himself, and knew that when his daughter once declared her intentions, no ordinary dangers would cause her to recede. Yet, as he cared for her in his own firm way, he did not feel altogether comfortable at taking her into them. Add to that, he was really a little out of temper at her finding out so much about the intentions that he had not revealed to her, and did not expect to until they were nearer to the scene of operations.

He tried to show nothing of this in his speech; the darkness hid the expression of his face.

"My dear child, since you are so far to the front that you can't go back, it will be just as

well for you not to worry about what losses may happen to me. You have discovered enough of the truth to force me to tell you the rest, unless I keep silent altogether. As you say, there is a mine. If it was worked after our American methods, it would turn out equal to the most fabulous bonanzas. Legally the title belongs to me, but in Mexico I am not sure that is any great advantage. The authorities, such as they are, seem to prefer to lay in with the rascals.

"I may be able to hold and work this mine. In that case it would take but a few years to satisfy my most ardent desires for wealth."

"I may not be able to hold this mine, which is located on what is known as 'The Guadana Grant,' but this much I do know: It has been worked before to very good purpose, and there is a *cache* of the result that is the first object of this expedition."

"Perhaps you may find some difficulty in either discovering or carrying away this buried treasure. No doubt there have been other searchers for it, who may have succeeded in unearthing it long ago. Others know of it and are watching, or will be watching you, if they have not already found it. You may make a convenient cat's-paw."

"As I have said, I must take my chances, though I fear not that the hidden fortune has been found, unless it be by the Indians."

"In the latter case it might still be there, safe enough. They have little use for the precious metals, though sometimes they use them for ornaments, or now and then take in to settlements a few small nuggets to exchange for whisky, or some necessity. It is generally agreed that the Indians know the secret diggings and hidden mines, but they keep the knowledge to themselves. They are only too anxious to avoid the rush that follows when such secrets are made known."

"And how is it that you know all about this secret, which otherwise seems to have been kept for so many years?"

"It was never a secret to me," responded the major, a trifle gloomily.

"Those that hide can find. It was years ago, yet it all seems as clear as though it happened yesterday. But there! I am in no mood for talking more to-night. The real journey begins to-morrow, and as an early start should be made, there is none too much time for rest. Some other time I will tell you more—perhaps when we have reached the goal it may seem all the more interesting. As I have talked frankly you might return the compliment. You know now what it is that draws me on this dangerous quest, but you have failed to say what has been—beyond a romantic love of adventure—the peculiar fascination for you."

"For me? Oh, I am going in the hope of meeting an old friend. Now, not another word to-night. I have had all the news I can digest, and I am going to sleep."

It was the first intimation that Raleigh had of his daughter's inner expectation, and it was a genuine surprise. He had no idea who the friend might be.

He thought of Frank Foxton first thing, but from what Rhoda had previously said, the friend could hardly be he. Who else was it then?

Of course, if there was another man in the case, she would hardly be apt to yield to the fascinations of Foxton, which was some consolation; but who was the other man? In spite of his intimate knowledge of his daughter, he was about to open his mouth and ask.

He closed his lips again when he remembered that nothing but stern parental command would force her to speak after she had declared the conversation closed. Under the circumstances he did not wish any unpleasantness between them, so he followed her example and composed himself for slumber, hoping that he would obtain some more explicit information on the morrow.

For the balance of the night the slumbers of the two were unbroken, though they were up by times, and preparing for the march that was before them.

Of that march it is not necessary to give a history. It was toilsome and tedious, yet Rhoda found interest in it, with less visible danger than she had expected. Destiny Dave knew the region fairly well, and timed the sections of the journey with an eye largely to her comfort. The little army was brought under strict discipline, and at night it would have puzzled even Rattlesnake to make his way to where Rhoda slept, without being challenged. His having done so once had no doubt been a warning that would not be neglected.

Much of their journey had been through a wild and often rugged country, but that finally began to change. They were skirting the boundaries of what might be called civilization.

Their way led over a chain of rolling foothills, away from which spread vast plains of almost level land. More than once they saw herds of cattle and their attendant horsemen in the distance. Concealment was hardly possible, if they had attempted it.

One day, from the top of one of these hills, when the air was at its clearest, they could see

miles away the dim outlines of extensive buildings.

Raleigh pointed them out to his daughter.

"It is worth while to see them, since they are the only signs of population we will be apt to meet with on our way."

"Yes. It looks as though one might be willing to live there. Who is their owner?"

Rhoda spoke as though they were at home, where the owner of every noticeable property was known to about everybody. Her father laughed.

"If I was well enough acquainted with the country to say, I would not be paying Destiny Dave quite so big a salary to act as guide. Some rich rancher, doubtless."

"Do you know?" she asked, turning to Dave, who happened to be riding near.

"I don't know, 'cause I never bin thar, an' don't jest recomember hearing ary one say; but I should jedge thar's only one ranch like that hereaways, an' that's what's called ther Banzos Hacienda. Ef it are, ther's beaps big money thar, more cattle than you kin shake a stick at frum now tell next day, an' a rattlin' leetle gal ter run ther ranch."

"The Banzos Hacienda!" exclaimed Rhoda. "Then let me take a look at it. I have an idea that it is worth the seeing."

She stood up as she spoke, and steadying herself by two of the posts to the top of the ambulance, took a long look at the clump of buildings that showed hazily in the distance. Then, with them as a center, she let her eyes sweep around until she had taken in the whole lay of the land. Then she dropped back in her seat.

"And so that is the Banzos Hacienda! Who would have thought it?"

The major was watching his daughter curiously.

"You seem strangely interested. What especial interest has the place for you?"

"Oh, I have heard of it. I must say the view surpasses my expectations, and some day I shall try to take a closer look. Would it be much out of our way to go there now?"

"Very much indeed," responded Raleigh, dryly.

"I think if we made the visit it is very doubtful if we found this trail again. But we will not discuss the subject now. There is no time to waste on side excursions. I only hope that we have not been seen from over yonder. I think not, though. Against the mountain line behind us we should make but little showing."

"And yonder are two gentlemen who seem to have much the same opinion," said Rhoda, pointing back over the route by which they had come.

"They are either following us, or are keeping out of sight of the hacienda."

"Heavens!" exclaimed Raleigh.

"It's Jones and that infernal Foxton."

CHAPTER XII.

FOXTON HOLDS THE DROP.

It was nothing but a guess, yet Raleigh guessed very shrewdly. Foxton had flanked the outlaws, as he had desired; and then ambled along southward, accompanied by his retainer. How they subsisted on the route was a conundrum it might have puzzled them to answer, save by saying they had lived off of the country by the aid of the shot-gun.

It would have been hard to have made the major believe that they had not been following his trail; while the fact was that as yet they had not struck it. The Fresh Sport was on a line of his own. The conversation of the two at the very moment Raleigh uttered his impatient exclamation might have enlightened him somewhat, could he have heard it.

"I'm afraid the old man has lost his chance for this time. Thought we'd strike his spoor for certain before this. Not that it makes much difference as long as no one goes through me, for my wealth and collaterals; but I think he'd rest easier if I could put in his hands the baggage of his I received from Captain John. He can wait, though. The good Samaritan didn't let side issues interfere very much with his affairs after all, and I don't think I will either."

The longer they journeyed together the more freely Frank spoke to his aide. Jones and his shot-gun had really been very comfortable attendants.

"Ez I don't know whar ther major's goin', I cain't say fer sure, but I'd jedge it won't be long afore we strike his tracks, unless he's slid over ther other side ov ther mount'in'. Yister-day mornin' war ther fu'st real good chance, an' ez we didn't hit him then we'll be ther more apt ter do it ter-day."

"Very true, if we kept on traveling, but I guess I've got enough for a little while. I'm thinking seriously of going into camp, and taking a leisurely view of the country. Not a bad place to settle, this. Eh, Robert?"

"Settle—blazes! Ef I warn't hired by ther month, an' pay in advance for thirty days, d'yer think I'd be hyar? Not ez long ez I had a throat ter cut, an' ther Greasers kerry knives. A white man hez ez much business hyar ez a cat down berlow 'thout claws."

"Ah, yes, you have tried to impress me with your prejudices—I will not say fears—but I don't

take much stock in them. And you forget the luck that always brings me out right side up. Why, it's just ten to one that by this time tomorrow morning we'll own a ranch, ten thousand head of cattle, and each of us an undivided half of a silver mine. I mind making that much clear, once, in twenty-four hours; and it wasn't much of a season for mines either."

"Ef he'd paid me fur a year stid ov a month I wouldn't mind takin' them odds, but I can't rake up 'nuf ov rags ter make it wu'th yer while ter try it on. I kin remark thar ain't no sich money in the wood."

"Oh, yes there is, Robert, if a man has the nerve to play for it. Yonder are the cattle; up there are silver mines by the cord; all that's needed is to get together the man that owns them. You might go out and steer him in, while I look around to see what sort of a country it is, anyhow."

"Not any sich foolishness in mine," was Robert's answer. He did not seem to know exactly what to make of the sport's proposition. It sounded like serious earnest as a proposal, and arrant nonsense according to the doctrine of probability.

"Them greasers kin skin ther hull rest ov ther world out at monte like lightning, which are ther only game you kin git 'em ter buck."

"But supposing I order you? I understood that you were hired by the month to look after my comfort."

"Not by daylight nobow. I'm me own boss ez long ez that lasts. I tho't I hed a puddin' when I struck ther job, but I didn't count on this dog-goned picnic."

"Well, then, you stay here and I'll look around. If I shouldn't turn up by to-morrow, hunt me out. I don't know that anything is going to happen, but it's just as well to cast an anchor to windward in this blarsted country, don't you know?"

"Yer mean it?"

"Every word."

"Then I'm stayin', an' off duty fur ther night. Yonder seems ter be ther spot I'd admire ter lay off at, an' you'll find me thar ef nothin' happens an' yer want ter try ter come my way; only don't try too much foolishness; it's what they don't admire down hyar, an' they'll jump yer quicker ner scat."

Jones had pointed to the entrance of what seemed a bough-shaded dingle, sunk in among the hills. It was perhaps half a mile distant. They had not visited it as yet, but as far as outward appearance went it was just about the place for concealment, which was what Jones was after.

Foxton nodded, gave a glance around to fix the location in his mind, and then, turning to the right, rode slowly down toward the plain. Had he accompanied Robert to the dingle he would have seen and crossed the trail of Raleigh's caravan; and perhaps changed his present intentions altogether.

In a few moments the two men were out of sight of each other just as they had long ago dropped out of the range of vision of the major and his party.

"Well," thought Foxton, as Rhadamanthus sedately picked his way downward. "I have got rid of him for the present. He's not exactly the sort of squire one would want to knock for him at the Castle Gate, and yet there's something about the blamed idiot that makes me think a man might have a worse pard at his back when the game was running rough. There's something deuced cool about him and his 'hired by the month,' that hits me about where I live. It's a satisfaction to know he's there, at the other end of the string, if things go crooked. But now for a glance around. It's a fact I might be in a better looking shape, but a fellow don't step out of a bandbox when he lands here, and like as not I'll find more fun than pleasure. I generally do, in spite of the bluff I was trying to give Jones a moment ago."

As he let such fancies run through his brain he smiled to himself. It was an amusement for him to guess at what, if at all anticipated, might make some very good men pause, or perhaps take a back track.

But Foxton kept his face in one direction, and that was toward the Banzos Hacienda. He had a glimpse of the speck in the distance which marked that location before he had called a halt, but nothing like the clearer view of the major. Jones had said nothing in regard to the ranch; and if he had not seen it Frank was not going to call his attention to it.

The speck had vanished before he had ridden a hundred rods. That was on account of the roll in the land. The points of the compass remained fixed in the mind of the Fresh Sport.

For several miles he ambled on after his usual careless fashion.

Then he suddenly sprang to the ground and threw the reins over the head of his mule. Something ahead demanded his attention. One foot he advanced to its investigation.

"New series, adventure number one," he softly murmured. "A regular frolic, with all the trimmings and side dishes. It's awful, the amount of fun I have to suffer—all because I won't shut my eyes, or travel the other way. But what is going on here, anyhow? It looks

awful much like a neck-tie party with the villains at the wrong end of the rope. Let me see, a little; let me see."

He stepped so lightly that not the slightest sound followed his footsteps. By so doing he had the chance of hearing a conversation that was earnest and fierce. As he spoke Spanish like a native—or a little better—there was no trouble about understanding what was said; while the scene that met his eye when he had gained a concealed point of observation, spoke better than words.

"And so, senors, you would slay me?"

It was a woman's voice that spoke the first words that came distinctly to his ear.

As their mellow cadence reached him he gripped the stock of his ready revolver a little harder. A singular smile played on his face while his eyes ran over the little knot of men clustered around the one woman in the center.

"Just as cool as they make 'em," he muttered; "let's listen for the answer; there's only four, but if it's not an actual necessity I don't see that there is any pleasure in killing them all. It's really lamentable the amount of slaughter one has to do anyhow."

The conversation being interpreted ran after this fashion:

"No, no, senorita. We would prevent you from slaying yourself. See, now? We are needy rascals, who long have had a mind to ask alms at the hacienda, but were too modest to intrude. So we staid up there in the mountain and starved. But to-day, holy saints! You come right to us. What can we do but tell you our needs? We do not threaten, but those that slight our prayer seldom live long. Providence cuts off the hard-hearted ones, even in the bloom of their youth."

"A quite poetical villain," thought Foxton, "though I don't know but what I prefer the Black Eagle style. The senorita don't seem to be suffering, so I may as well wait to see what she will say. The little witch! She looks more charming than ever."

"Providence must even work its will since no alms have I to give thee. Yet hasten slowly. There are those who seem to love me living, and once dead they would bound you to your holes and take a fearful revenge."

"We will risk the revenge so long as we find other things are satisfactory. Of course we do not suppose that the senorita carries her fortune with her when she rides upon the plain, but it would not be hard out of the abundance of her wealth for her to make us wretches happy for life. Ten thousand pesos, for instance. It is but a drop in the bucket, and she could spare it so easy."

"Not as easy, perhaps, as you think. If it was cattle, now, that you wanted, I could say, 'Here, Tomasol there are a thousand, two thousand, ten thousand head of cattle; take what you want of them.' But the cattle you can get anyhow."

"I understand. But you can send it or have it brought to us."

"As I have not a dollar in the world there might be some difficulty."

"Pardon me, senorita: if I was a woman I would say that too, even if I was told that I lied by those I was trying to deceive. Cattle are no good to us; it is money that we want."

"And I have none."

"Sorry then. You will bear us witness that we have given all the chance to come to terms that we possibly could; now we must try some measures a little stronger. Take your last look at the world around you. It is a lovely one, is it not?"

"But what would you want?"

"The key to that safe that sits over in your room. There are fortunes in it."

"But I swear there is no coin; and the key I had has been lost."

"No nonsense, now. For the last time I ask you. Will you furnish us the key or the contents? Will you promise us the ten thousand pesos? We'll keep you safely till they come if you do. Otherwise, we end it all right here, for you; and sack the ranch when every man who might help defend it is out looking for its buried mistress. How shall it be, Senorita Madelaine Banzos?"

"I am in your hands by an accident and my own foolishness. I cannot say that I am sorry I cannot comply with your request since I doubt if I would if I could. There is only one thing I can do. I have done it already, and assure you again that you cannot and will not get from me the ransom you demand, while the only person who might help you to it, Raimondo Carjador, is away. There is no money in holding me, senors; and there is a great deal of danger. If you are wise you will take my promise to say nothing of this outrage, and set me free. Some other time perhaps you may find me with things in more favorable shape for your interests."

She was a dainty little lady, the perfect type of a brunette beauty on a slightly reduced scale. She spoke without fear or hesitation, neither sinking under the threats of her captors, nor shrinking at the incredulous scorn with which her words were received.

"A lady after my own heart," thought Foxton. "She don't sink worth a cent. As long

as she can keep her courage up it may be as well to stay in the bushes and see what these fellows are after. That one seems to be pretty good-looking, in spite of his disguise. He must be the boss of the outfit. The others are just an ordinary-looking set of ruffians. Ah, it struck me there was something more than dollars and dimes at stake. He begins to show his hand. A man might light a match at his eyes. They're red-hot."

The spokesman was answering the young lady, and for the first time there was a gleam of passion in his tone.

"So you think if we can get no coin we should turn you loose. Never! There is something almost as good—revenge. If it were only the pesos, truly would I have seen thee strangled before I would have moved a step against thee. But revenge! Ah, perhaps it is not too late for thee to see into whose hands thou hast fallen?"

The cheeks of Madelaine flushed a trifle and she shot a piercing glance at the speaker.

Yet a puzzled look crept over her face and she slowly shook her head.

"Never have I seen thee before, if my memory serves me rightly. Nor do I know that I ever harmed one so that he should seek such revenge as you speak of."

"Not thou, but thy accursed race. Thy lover—Carjador—thy friends. Theirs are the sins for which thou must begin to pay. Oh, I will have such vengeance—"

"Good Lord, man! Hasn't this thing gone far enough? If it hasn't I guess the balance of the conversation had better be addressed to me. Hold hard there all of you or down you go. I have the drop, and there's not a living man that knows better how to make the most of it."

Foxton saw that threats of the villain were having their effect on the senorita, and thought it time to interfere. He stepped coolly out of the bushes and advanced toward the outlaws with a cocked revolver in each hand, and his mouth full of Spanish words and English idioms.

CHAPTER XIII.

SOMETHING IN A CELLAR BESIDES WINE.

IN spite of herself a little cry of delight escaped the lips of the senorita as she saw Foxton with his revolvers, and heard him so coolly call a halt in the proceedings.

If she fancied that he had a troop behind him it was no more than his actions seemed to her to warrant. In her view of things if one man was attacking half a dozen armed desperadoes he would begin to shoot while he held the advantage of being unseen. She hardly understood the etiquette of "the drop."

The outlaws, or whatever they were, evidently did. There was a something in the tones of this man that meant business. Besides, he was evidently an American, and had two revolvers. He might have had half a dozen knives and they would have laughed at him; but a pistol was a different thing.

The spokesman with a mechanical movement did draw a knife half-way from its sheath, but the motion stopped there. He was looking right into the muzzle of the weapon in Foxton's right hand, and it seemed to him, in the first shock of his surprise that he could see in it the substance of approaching death.

"Open to reason are you?" laughed the Fresh Sport, as he noticed that he had his men well in hand.

"Now, that's something like. I'm not going to harrow your feelings asking you to hold up your hands, but I'll simply remark that the first man that tries to handle a shooter goes over the range. You understand me? I always speak the truth, and I can shoot to the line of a hair. My friend, you! What were you going to do with that rope?"

He nodded toward a noosed cord that had dropped from the leader's hand when he grasped his knife.

"Who are you? By what right do you interfere?" was the answer, given in the sharper tone of a reviving courage.

"Know you not that we are five to one, and that if we but raise our hands, the fall of them would crush you? Pass on, senor, if you are wise, and leave this woman in our hands, where she belongs. Look her in the face and see if it does not show that it is but the truth I speak."

"Thanks for the explanation, but the prospect as it is covers about all the ground I care to take in for the present. We'll accept all that for granted; but what I asked was, what were you going to do with that rope?"

"Senor, it was to hang me with; at least, so they said."

There was as yet no personal recognition, but Madelaine saw that the man to the rescue was an American, so that she spoke in his own tongue.

"And you intended to hang the senorita," continued Frank Foxton, still speaking to the outlaw-in-chief.

"What a shocking villain it was! I really have my doubts about your being fit to live, and if the lady would only convince me that I've a call to act as executioner, blame me if I wouldn't send you out of the dew myself!"

The light, bantering tone of the sport may have deceived the Mexicans, or it may be that

they had simply recovered from the shock of his sudden appearance. Anyhow, with a sinuous, scarcely perceptible motion, they clustered closer together. A man as wise as Foxton in the ways of the wicked, could tell that they were each and all, without any concerted plan, crouching for a spring.

Madelaine saw that—and thought she saw something more. Though scarcely willing to believe the evidence of her senses, there came to her the certain knowledge that the face of the sport was not altogether unfamiliar, and she remembered where she had seen it last, so many hundreds and hundreds of miles away.

She was not altogether charmed with the semi-recognition. The gentleman that she had known then did not seem, in her remembrance of things, to be the sort of man she most wanted to come, afoot and alone, to her aid.

The outlaws, with eyes only for the sport, had been shifting to one side—she had been as quietly shifting to the other. They no longer surrounded her. There was a chance for action. It seemed like a desertion on her part, but what better could she do?

Quietly she held out her hand behind her and made an unobserved motion.

It was to no human being that she beckoned, yet the signal was answered promptly enough.

Cautiously and quietly a piebald mustang stepped toward her. The fellow that had been holding him had dropped his bridle upon the advent of Mr. Foxton.

The piebald was coming quite rapidly, but Madelaine did not wait. The moment he was nearest to her she made a quick spring, and floated on his back like a bird, striking him sharply with her palm as she settled into the saddle.

"Hold them off if you can; I will have a dozen men here in five minutes."

As the horse sprung away she shouted back her promise, and almost immediately vanished from sight.

Not that Foxton followed her with his eyes. Such side issues never diverted him from the occupation in hand. It was the outlaws that turned slightly and shot after her a mad glance of baffled hate. She was mounted; they were on foot; and Mr. Foxton was in the way.

"Steady, there!" he gritted, shrewdly guessing that if the fusillade once began, some of the bullets would be quite apt to come his way.

"You can't touch her, anyhow; but the first man that makes a fool of himself trying it on, gets measured for a wooden overcoat. And he'll need it bad, mighty bad, even if there's not an undertaker around here to fill the bill, and the weather very sultry."

"The stranger speaks sense. Be silent a trifle longer. Since she has fled from us, vain would it be to hope to overtake her, for her mustang goes like the wind."

"Level, very level, for a head that is as thick as yours sometimes seems," laughed the sport.

"I don't believe you hold me in any good will but you'll hardly try to get away with the great tornado of the Southwest after all he's said and done, and the good advice he is going to give you."

"What you want to do is to evacuate. I shall unsling my Winchester and provide for my safety while I watch you going. After that I shall depart myself. She said she would be back in five minutes, with a dozen men. I guess she meant it, and I declare I don't want to be compelled to stand on guard till she arrives. It would make me think I was an accomplice in the bloody murder that will follow immediately after her coming."

"Who are you?" asked the outlaw leader sharply, once more turning toward the sport.

"For future reference only, eh? Put it in the day-book and post it to the ledger with a big red line around it? Still it's a satisfaction to hear it after such a fizzle, though you may know that I had a big hand in the backdown. Foxton is the gentle cognomen by which I want to be called to grub while I linger in this vicinity—Frank Foxton. Do you know a better?"

"It is all the same. Thou hast lost us our chance and our prisoner, and for the present I would see no more of thee. Go thy way and we will go ours; but prepare to die when next we meet thee."

"Thanks for the kind warning; though, when you know me better, you will understand that I am always ready for that—or the other thing. Good-day! I hope I see you going?"

With the hint he swiftly dropped one revolver in its sheath and brought his Winchester over his head to a ready.

His precautions scarcely seemed to have been necessary. Abruptly the leader of the gang turned, and his men followed his example. Without a word they strode away.

"I guess the neatest thing for me to do," thought Mr. Foxton, "is to arrange myself on Rhadamanthus. If I understand these gentlemen their courage rises the higher up they get on horseback, and no doubt they have steeds, and perhaps pards, somewhere not far off. I'm not exactly prepared to guard on foot against a cavalry charge. The senorita might get back in time or she might not. Anyway, I am not certain that I am ready to meet her."

Cautiously Foxton fell back, for he was not certain that an attempt to flank him would not be made, and he might run himself right into danger.

Nothing did he see of the Mexicans, however, and in a few moments he was once more on the back of his mule.

"And now, I guess I'll amble along toward the ranch. I can get there by sundown, and if I know anything about hospitality they won't turn me away. The little witch! She is charming as ever—and just as cool. It seemed to me that she had a horrible suspicion that she recognized me at the very last. It might have been worth my while to have made certain, but then I was so very busy. It really wasn't safe to look the other way."

Very regretfully did he murmur his plaint while putting Rhadamanthus to his paces, and doggedly holding his course toward the buildings he had not long since seen in the distance, passing the spot where he had just parted from the quartette without seeing any one.

If Senorita Madelaine had been alone undoubtedly the Fresh Sport would have looked for her trail to follow it to the end. From her words he believed that she had companions or servants at no great distance and he did not care to ride to the ranch in their company, while he scarcely thought they would trouble themselves making much search for him. The trails would show that the outlaws had gone one way, and he another.

It took some little time to get clear of the foot-hills, among which a dozen different parties could be within shouting distance of each other without know it.

Finally the ranch was in view, with a great herd or two of cattle, and a little knot of horsemen scouring over the plain.

At the last he looked long and earnestly, striving to see if he could recognize the flutter of feminine garments. It was too far off to distinguish objects very clearly, yet he was almost certain that a woman—of course that must be Madelaine—rode at the head.

He shrugged his shoulders, chirruped to Rhadamanthus, and rode on more silent than usual. If it was Madelaine he saw she must have deliberately abandoned him to his fate.

That was more than he expected. It took something more than an earthquake to shock Frank Foxton, but at that moment he felt a trifle disgusted, to say the least.

If the party saw they did not appear to notice him; and after a little they disappeared from the range of his vision.

He was not surprised at this, though they had been traveling on what seemed to be a level plain. He understood that they had entered some depression in the ground—perhaps a *barranca* that stretched across the plain, and through which ran the trail to the ranch. He marked well in his mind the spot where they had vanished and held his own course toward it.

He saw nothing more of the party, but, he found the marks of their footsteps at length, and followed them straight down a steep and uncomfortable path.

"I reckon it's the ranch or China now, and that's a fact. Maybe it would have been as well to have seen first where the flock came out at, but I guess I'm not far wrong. And whichever way it takes me, it's a safe bet that there will be fun at the other end. But what an elegant place this would be for Raimondo to murder a man. If he got in ahead and knew I was coming—whew!"

Foxton's reflections, as he made his way along the silent, shadowy trail, were, not what the ordinary citizen would consider strictly cheerful, though they did not give him much real trouble. He looked up carelessly at the thread of daylight above him, at the walls of riven rock, or crumbling clay; and down at the rough rocky road beneath him. That was all the prospect he had, but he was not seeking for prospect. He was following in the wake of some careless riders who evidently knew the way.

How far the *barranca* extended he never found out, since, after a journey that began to run into the hours he reached an upward path which he took without hesitation though he had no means of knowing whether it had been followed by his unconscious guides.

Prudently, however, he dismounted before he began the ascent. At a glance he had decided that the path was practicable, but it might have been safer.

"A man and a club could keep down about two dozen here," was his mental comment, as he gave a great tug at the bridle and landed the mule on the plain above.

"And thank our lucky stars, there's the ranch at last! I wonder if I will want to get away faster than I came? If so, I had better look around for landmarks. This is not the easiest place in the world to find by moonlight."

Landmarks were not at all plenty, so Foxton made some. He tore a silk handkerchief in two and placed the half on the path a little below the level of the plain. To one a few yards away, it was invisible; but it was easily seen by riding close to the edge of the chasm and looking downward.

There were other spots that looked much like this, and Foxton knew it. It was well to be able to tell them apart in case he was called on to make a hasty retreat. Why he should have any reason for that he could not have told—unless, indeed, Raimondo was somewhere ahead of him—but the sport was a strange mixture of care and carelessness.

A hundred yards further on he dropped the remainder of the silk by the side of the almost imperceptible trail as a sort of danger signal, warning him to be on the lookout.

Then he stood up in his stirrups and looked around, for he was carefully taking his bearings, and at the same time looking for his unconscious guides.

Of the latter nothing was to be seen, but the ranch was now so near, the buildings in such plain sight, that, unless he encountered an unpassable gash across his course, he needed no guide. He could hardly miss his way if he tried.

And he reached the ranch shortly before sundown. Of course a gentleman so fresh as Frank Foxton would feel no hesitation in billeting himself almost anywhere for a supper and a night's lodging, and he succeeded here to his heart's desire.

Only, when he gravely made cautious inquiries in regard to the proprietor, he was somewhat troubled to hear that she was not at home. That she had taken a fancy to visit the Carjador Hacienda, a dozen miles or so distant, and had started in the early morning with some of her *vaqueros*. It was not likely that she would return before the morrow. But that should make no difference. The doors of the dwelling of a Banzos were always open to a wayfarer, and the Senorita Madelaine would grow wild if she heard that an Americano had been turned away. He might rest easy since his couch had already been prepared for him.

After such fashion the grave-faced Mexican major-domo spoke, and Foxton was forced to be content. After all there was little likelihood that Madelaine had come to harm; and if not this was no unwelcome change in the programme since he was tired enough from his journeyings. He felt himself lulled to rest by the very thought of a comfortable night on an orthodox couch. About the hour he had expected to begin his interview with the proprietress he was sound asleep.

So very deep was his slumber that even a light hand on his shoulder did not at once awaken him. Only when a noosed cord slipped over his wrists and he was altogether helpless did he make his first vain effort to spring from his bed.

"Struggle not, my friend," said a low, stern voice, that he recognized as belonging to Raimondo Carjador.

"There are dungeons as well as wine-cellars under the Banzos *habitation*. Once inside of them and you trouble me no more forever, if my aim be not otherwise reached."

CHAPTER XIV.

RHODA REACHES HER GOAL.

ACCORDING to a well-known adage, there is such a thing as being too previous, and according to appearances Mr. Foxton had been guilty of that self-same thing.

Hardly was he out of hearing of the spot where he had come upon the outlaws and Madelaine, when that young lady returned, but coming in an entirely different direction from that in which he would have expected her.

She was not precisely alone; nor did she have such reinforcements at her back as she had intimated she would bring when so hastily leaving the men at bay.

The way of that was this:

The information that Foxton afterward received in regard to her intention of visiting the Carjador Ranch was correct enough as far as it went; but she had no such design when setting out in the morning in company with that very party Frank had followed. But having suddenly made up her mind when the proposed limit of their excursion had been almost reached, she bade one of her *vaqueros* follow her, and turned suddenly aside.

It was shortly after this that she fell into the hands of the enemy, who unceremoniously tumbled Jose, her esquire, off of his mustang, and carried her away to a still more sequestered spot than the one where their ambush had been laid.

She thought and they thought that Jose was dead.

If they had not been so very sure of it, they would have paid a little more attention to him and found that he was very much alive. They would also have removed a brace of revolvers and a long knife; which came in very handy for the senorita and their owner a little later on.

When she called back her words of encouragement, which she did not believe would be understood by any one but the Fresh Sport, she did not have him in view at all; but was thinking of the rest of the party, which she believed she would be able to intercept on their return. Unless time had flown much faster than she thought it had they could not, in her mind, be very far distant.

It was a shock and a bitter disappointment to see them a mile or more nearer the ranch than she was, and going like the wind.

"*Caramba!*" she exclaimed, the oath falling quite heartily from her pretty lips.

"I made sure that I could catch them here, but I am too late. I could not stop them now, before they reached the canyon, if there. Yet I have left him in woeful danger, all on my account. Heavens! can a Banzos be so ungrateful! No, never! Yet—the villains got my revolvers before I even thought it might be necessary to use them. If I could only recover them I would go, if alone. Without them, what use is there for me? And the American! It must be he; yet how did he come to get here? I could have sworn that by this time he had altogether forgotten me. And if he had not, that he would never risk his precious neck for the best woman living. Doubly is it my fault that he is in danger, if not dead. I must go."

So she reasoned, or was trying to reason; and she gave a little cry as she turned, and saw a mounted cavalier riding toward her. He was neither Mr. Foxton, nor one of the desperadoes; but only Jose, mounted, armed, and searching for her.

He looked a little the worse for wear; but his sight was clear and his brain cool. With effusion he greeted her, and would have begun a hundred questions concerning her escape.

"No time is there to waste, Jose. I found a friend; or, at least, a friend found me. The brave young American saved me when they had me already at the end of the rope. But what could I do there? Unarmed, I could only flee, and leave him to their clutches when they chose to close their hands. But I promised to bring aid, and I will keep my word if I die for it. Give me one of thy pistols and then ride hard for the ranch. A light weight hast thou, and Brigada and the rest may yet be overtaken."

"When thou art dead and buried, and they are in their first sleep, perhaps," responded Jose.

"Could I go as the crow goes it could not be done—and thou knowest the road. The revolver thou mayest have, but its mate and I go with thee. An American? Some of them are very fiends, and would think little of facing five bandits, or fifty."

"Yet this one, I fear me, is not of that kind, though gallant enough a cavalier back in the city of the States where I met him. But if thou art willing to take thy life in thy hand, take it and come. We two alone will ride to the rescue. But be silent. Had he not taken them by surprise he would have fared but illy. We must learn a lesson from him, little as I thought he should ever teach me one."

So, as silently as possible they rode on; though, in fact, they made noise enough to be heard twice the length of an ordinary pistol-shot. With their weapons cocked and poised they rode down into the dingle—to find it vacant.

"There has been no battle here," said Jose, calmly looking over the ground with the eye of a connoisseur.

"There is no blood on the grass, nor scent of powder in the air. I will wager when once thou wert no longer there to hold them to business, that all hands ran away. Oh, I know them. There are plenty to fight for a beautiful senorita, who will only run for their own ugly selves."

"Great is my hope that you speakest the truth. Yet, how canst thou know? Look about thee! Find the trail. It may have been that they turned the tables on him: that they found their courage, or he lost his: that they carried him away with them to where they might more safely take vengeance for his interference. A hundred pesos will I give thee to stand close by me now."

Jose was not a very brilliant trailer but it did not take him long to discover the direction the outlaws went after they had mounted their horses.

To find at all the trail of Frank Foxton was a different thing.

He was not altogether a novice in such matters, and it had seemed to him that the lighter he stepped the better it might be in case the brigands took a fancy for a still hunt.

He went away so carefully that he left no trace to speak of. Had not Madelaine told him of his presence, Jose would never have suspected it.

The result was just what Frank Foxton would not have cared to have it.

Jose was puzzled; then he grew interested; he looked around with the closest attention. He did not think to follow back the trail by which Foxton had come or he might have made a discovery. It would not have been difficult, since Madelaine could have started him on the latter end.

"No use is it?" he said, at length.

"He must have wings, or they carried him away. No mark can I see. I would wager a little that the fine American found his fanfaron was of no use, and he could do naught else when they closed in with him. I am afraid, senorita, that we come too late. Best now that we set our faces for the ranch. It is late to set Miguel and his herdsmen on the trail, but he may find them."

"And leave him in their hands instead of my self? Never. We will follow until we know something more of his fate."

Jose was young and inexperienced. He was hardly the man among her retainers that Madelaine would have selected for such work; but he was the best she had to her hand. Yet he had courage, and was anxious to work her will. At her order he gave a little grimace, and prepared to obey.

"Very bravely said, senorita. And if they can catch all three of us, why, they will find their handful so much the less easy to hold. Here is where they mounted their mustangs—after this their trail seems not at all hard to take in hand. If they had killed the young man, we would have discovered some signs of it; if they have taken him along, I doubt not we will soon find some signs of that."

"Haste, then. They have already too much start for us to waste more time talking."

"Considering that if we go too fast we may get closer than we wish, and if we go too slow we may not catch sight of them at all."

"Better too fast than too slow; and we can only take our chances."

As the brigands were probably a good way off, it was a good time to speak bravely; but it was also a good time to urge on their horses. The trail was not hard to follow, and they went on for a good while at a rapid rate. Even the senorita began to feel fatigued. It was something of a relief to see Jose, who was some distance in advance, suddenly rein in his steed and look inquiringly at the ground.

"What is it, Jose?" asked Madelaine, anxiously.

"I am not sure. There are tracks here of wagons, and perhaps a score of horses. They have come from yonder direction, and passed here not so long ago. If they belong to these same outlaws it is time for us to halt—to go the other way. Not a mouthful for them would we make."

"More likely that they would prove to be friends, even though their trails do here run together. Probably that will be for but a little while. Keep sharp watch to note where our game turns off. We give not up the chase yet."

They looked to the right hand and left as they galloped on. The way was easy and the trail plain. Perhaps they went faster than they thought and overran their game.

At all events, before they saw any sign of the fugitives, they heard a sharp hail:

"Halt! Who goes thar? Whither do yer go?"

The senorita recognized the tones at once as coming from American lips, and drew in her mustang. She had found help, no doubt, though it startled her to see how easily she might have ridden into the very arms of the outlaws.

"A friend am I, I hope; and I go to the rescue. If you are what your tongue indicates, perhaps you will think it your duty to ride with me."

"All right, you kin talk it over with ther boss. Guess yer ain't very danger'us nobow, unless it moun't be ez a friend. That's w'ar ther wimmin-critters most allers hurt."

And out into the trail stepped Old Sirene, his rifle on his arm.

His general appearance was not altogether reassuring, and Jose promptly covered him with his revolver.

The action did not at all disconcert him. He waved his empty hands gently.

"I don't jest guess you've ary ser'us d'zines on yourn truly, an' ef yer hev you'd better talk it over fust a bit. Ef yer wants ther trail, put up yer pop-guns an' went along. Ef yer wants me, what's what? I'm around."

"I am looking for the train that has passed this way not so long ago," answered Madelaine boldly.

"It looks as though it might be a strong one, and I hoped that I might obtain aid."

"So yer might, so yer might—ef Old Sirene ain't big ernuf ter fill ther bill. We kin start fur e'm while you're tellin' yer leetle story; an' ef it's got any bigness we'll find 'em afcra yer gits through. It won't be fur, nohow."

Very briefly did she tell her story; when she had finished Sirene grinned genially and shook his head.

"Don't be afeard fur him, leetle one; but onless he happens ter be jest b'ilin' over with good humor, yer moun't slip in a 'lay me' er two fer ther souls ov them pore bandits. Ef thar's on'y four they wouldn't be much more ner common amusement fur ther fresh sharp; let erlone not ter say I see'd him a-gallopin' off on that mule of hissen, makin' a straight break fur ther Banzos Hacienda. Hyar's ther boss; mebbe he'll tell yer ther same thing."

The train had halted, dinner had been eaten, and everybody was enjoying as well as possible a *siesta*. Nearing hoof-beats attracted attention, and as Madelaine and her attendants reached the camp, Major Raleigh stepped forward to meet them, a look of surprise sweeping over his face as his eyes rested fairly on the features of the beautiful stranger.

"Foxton hez bi'n chippin' in ez usu'l," Sirene said, by way of introductory explanation, "an'

mebbe you kin tell her thet it ain't likely thet—"

He was interrupted by a cry from the ambulance.

"Madelaine!"

"Rhoda."

And then two young ladies were running toward each other with extended arms.

CHAPTER XV.

WHERE IS MR. FOXTON?

MAJOR RALEIGH first frowned and then smiled. The recognition was not at all pleasing to him, but its earnestness was amusing. He knew, now, who was the friend that his daughter had wished and expected to see, but the secret of their acquaintance was a mystery. He listened in the hope of an explanation.

For a little there was not much that could be understood by any one but the girls themselves. When the first gush was over they held each other's hands and looked in each other's faces.

"You have not changed a bit, Rhoda."

"You are just the same, Madelaine. This morning, when I looked down at your nest on the plain, and they told me who lived there, I thought I must fly away to you. Perhaps I would have done so had I known that you were just your own self. But I half dreaded the meeting. There was the little fear that I might find you cold and careless. Now that I have you I will not willingly give you up soon. What blessed wind wafted you hither?"

"Not a very blessed breeze did it seem at the time; but I can be thankful enough, now that I see whither it has brought me. A dozen different chances have all fitted, one within the other. Had one cog been missing the wheels would never have gone around."

"This is my father, Madelaine. You made me almost forget him. My school friend, Madelaine Banzos, father; the best friend I ever had."

Rhoda suddenly came back to her every-day senses enough to remember the major. She gave her brief introduction with her arm over Madelaine's shoulder, and looked as though Raleigh might attempt to tear her away. The major bowed.

"I am charmed to meet the young lady, for my daughter's sake as well as for my own. But before any more time is lost let me ask what it was that Sirene intended to explain. In whatever it is possible for me to do or say, command me."

He spoke in a courtly way, recalling Madelaine to the cause of her presence there. Without delay she told her story.

"Foxton? Ah, yes. I know the man, and have seen him at work, but, it is not likely that he will intrude here to-night. Unless my eyes deceived me he is, as Sirene has said, safe enough. Perhaps, even, I can convince you. Yes. Wait a moment."

The major gave a glance downward toward the plain. He had chosen for his camp a spot where there was a full view of the savanna beneath them, and he could see in the distance a little spot that was moving straight toward the hacienda.

Having marked the spot, he turned to the ambulance. There was a very good spyglass there and this he handed to the young lady.

"Yonder goes a young man; is it your young man? Look at him well; he has been in sight for some time already, and it is not hard to guess whence he has come."

"Ah, it is a relief," she answered, after a long, steadfast look.

"He came to my help so bravely I would never have forgiven myself if anything had happened to him while I seemed to have deserted him. And yet," she added, in an undertone, "he might have waited until I came."

The major laughed.

"Do not be troubled. The gentleman is accustomed to taking part in such frolics. If there is any trouble going on anywhere near him he always takes a hand. They call him the Fresh Sport where he is best known, and before you get through with him you will be apt to admit that he deserves the title. He seems to be looking for you where you live, and I doubt not you will find him waiting there to greet you as an old friend."

The major spoke jestingly and without much thought of his words, so that he did not notice the suspicious glance the senorita cast in his direction. His words struck a good deal closer than he knew to the truth as Madelaine fancied she saw it.

Nevertheless, she shrugged her shoulders as she answered:

"Well, then, he will have to wait; that is all. The ride to the hacienda is longer far than it looks, and I certainly shall not take it to-night. From here we could not reach it by midnight. I shall camp with Rhoda, and to-morrow will guide you all to the ranch. Of course you were coming to me."

"Rhoda kept her own counsel, and the knowledge that she had a friend here was a genuine surprise when it burst on me a short time since. I fancy that her object all along was to find the Banzos Ranch, though that was the last thing in my thoughts. I am on my way southward,

and, at least until my return, must defer the honor and pleasure of being one of your guests."

"But Rhoda shall not," answered Madelaine, after the positive manner that sat so prettily on her.

"If you cannot tarry, she must be left behind. The dozens of times that we have talked this visit over when we were at school together! You shall not say a word against it!"

The idea was a little startling; but not altogether unpleasant to the major. Rhoda had been the worry of his life since they had started on this trip, and to drop her here, if only for a few weeks, would be a blessed relief.

"Thanks for your very cordial invitation. I will consider it, and it may be that I can see my way through for Rhoda to accept. You have promised to be our guest to-night. In the morning I will give you my decision."

"And it will certainly be, yes!" cried Rhoda, clapping her hands in glee, such as her father had seen her show but seldom.

"Rest easy, Madelaine. When he considers he is lost, I will be your guest at last!"

So the two girls, with their arms entwined, lounged about the camp, talking to each other in a muffled tone, and were as happy as two kittens.

The result was hardly a matter of doubt. The major abandoned the ambulance for the night, and the young ladies talked till they were tired. Then they slept quite soundly, and were ready for an early start in the morning.

The major did not go with them. He could not take his train to the ranch, nor had he the time to spare. The distance did not seem as great as it was, and he and Sirene rode with them some little distance. He had no fears for them. The outlaws had not turned up again, and he doubted that they would very soon. If Mr. Foxton had interviewed them after his own emphatic way, it might well be that they were in no fit condition to do so.

But he gave them a caution about wandering too much without an escort, and advised them to keep their eyes open. Then he turned back without having fixed any particular time for Rhoda's visit to end, and only full of the idea of making up for lost time.

Jose led the way toward the ranch; the two young ladies rode side by side, keeping up their conversation and not much interested in anything else.

Of course Rhoda had something to say about her own adventures; and Frank Foxton figured prominently in them.

Madelaine had listened with a puzzled air, but it was only when they had swung loose from the major that she spoke frankly.

"Rhoda, dear, I don't understand. This Foxton must be a terrible man, if all accounts be correct."

"Not so terrible to any one but evil-doers," replied Rhoda.

"Father seemed to have a peculiar prejudice against him; to me he seemed very much of a gentleman when he was where such a thing was possible. It was only when it was life and death for somebody that he became a little desperado. And then he always placed himself on the weaker side. I think it very fortunate that there are such men; and still more, that we have met him."

"But to look at him one would never believe it. To think of Frank Foxton driving away four desperate men—just driving them away as if they had been so many sheep or cattle—to say nothing of what you have told me of your own experience! I really would not have believed it."

"Why not, dear?"

"Don't you see? I have never told you, but I met a Mr. Frank Foxton in the East. Our acquaintance did not last long, but I must say he made the most of his time while it lasted. He was very agreeable, Rhoda; but I thought I had a modicum of common sense, and decided that it would not do. He hardly looked like the sort of man one would want to lean on out here; for I must tell you that between rebels and outlaws, refractory peons, stampeding herds, bad men, rustlers, cattle-thieves, life in the saddle, and plenty of hard work, the man that manages the Banzos Hacienda has no sinecure. I told the little villain so, and he only laughed. If he had even taken me to a shooting-gallery and shown me what he could do! I was afraid that in spite of myself he would grow too interesting, so I ran away without leaving any address. From that day to yesterday, I never found or heard anything of him. How do you suppose he learned anything about me?"

"And you never told me anything about him?" Rhoda said, reproachfully.

"How could I? I have not seen you since; and we had agreed that we were not to write—in hopes that we would grow desperate and see each other the sooner. Ha, ha! What dunces children can be! But, do you think it is the same young man?"

"If the name and appearance are the same I would not have a doubt. If I had only known he was your friend!"

"Come now, Rhoda, own up. Has he not fascinated you the least bit? How could you

help it when he has saved you twice, and he so handsome?"

"Not a bit of it. I thought him very agreeable, that was all. If father had not warned me so thoroughly to be on my guard against his fascinations it is possible I would not have found him even that. He shall be all your own, if you want him."

"Oh, you are going entirely too fast. I did like him, and it will be a relief from the monotony to have him put in an appearance. But there can really be nothing serious."

"Then, don't it strike you that Mr. Foxton will have made a remarkably unprofitable journey, and a peculiarly unpleasant visit? I am sorry for him in advance."

"So sorry that you would almost be willing to comfort him. Ha, ha! Don't fear for him, dear. He will not break his heart. If he had shown his true colors sooner he would have stood more chance now. At all events, he could not have come at a more appropriate time, and we will try to make his visit agreeable."

And so they rattled on; sometimes about Mr. Foxton, and sometimes about people and things that are entirely foreign to this story.

There were no adventures on the way, though to Rhoda the entire journey seemed to be one, and the road through the *barranca* the acme of romance.

"They will have told him that I have gone to the Carjador Ranch, and will most likely be back to-day. Doubt not but that we will find him waiting to receive us. But we will say nothing till we hear his story."

So whispered Madelaine as they rode up to the buildings, and saw that their coming had been noted. A dozen or so of the retainers of the house gathered in almost no time—but there were no signs of Mr. Frank Foxton.

Instead, Rhoda saw a tall, splendidly-dressed, and darkly-handsome *caballero*, come forward and receive Madelaine as she sprang lightly to the ground.

"My dear child, how imprudent!" he murmured in her ear.

"There will always be welcome for thee at the house of Carjador; not only for thee but all thy train. Come not alone, then, for the journey is long and the way dangerous. Besides, had I known I would have awaited thy coming or met thee on the trail. Neither of us would have had a vain ride, and thou wouldst have been much the safer."

"No vain ride have I had, Senor Raimondo. Truly it was the chance of my lifetime, since I found my dearest friend, whom, else, I would have missed altogether. Rhoda Raleigh, whom I knew and loved when I was in the States!—Rhoda, this is Don Raimondo Carjador, the friend, the guide, the guardian of whom I have spoken."

Raimondo had experienced his surprise already, and had recovered from it. He acknowledged the introduction with one of his grandest bows, and then turned eagerly to the senorita for explanation, giving Rhoda an opportunity to study his face.

There was something familiar about the man, though for the life of her she could not remember where she had seen him.

"Yes, she is a brave girl. Her father had occasion to visit these regions, and she came all the way along with him, just on the chance of seeing me. You cannot imagine what that means; but I—oh, when I had been away for a year or two, though I loved my home it made me shudder to think of coming back to it. It is so far! It is so wild and desolate to one who has lived their years in a great city."

"You need not attempt to convince me. I believe it fully, already. But for one who has had the courage to come it is not hard to make the visit pleasant enough to be long remembered. Seldom it is, Miss Raleigh, that strangers to the region find their way to the Banzos Hacienda. Rest assured that you are welcome here, and that my own humble dwelling, with all that is in it, will be at your service."

The Don spoke English as well as Madelaine. He also seemed so much in earnest that Rhoda found her first unfavorable impression vanishing. She even hoped they would see more of him, when she had rested. For the present she felt more like rest than anything else.

The senorita understood her and cut the interview short. Being wise she knew that Rhoda could sooner sleep than talk, and carried her away accordingly.

Yet a little later, when they were alone, she made her plaint:

"Very singular it is, but one and all deny having had a visitor last night. If he came not to the ranch where could he be now?"

And revolving the important question they both threw themselves down to take their rest.

CHAPTER XVI. A BODY ON THE FLOOR.

RHODA was enjoying an afternoon nap. To get back into civilization after so long a spell at savagery was regular bliss; and to know that she had at last accomplished the object of her expedition was complete satisfaction. For the next few weeks she anticipated thorough enjoy-

ment, and so she could afford to take her immortal ease at present.

But something broke in on her slumbers. It was not a muffled roar, nor yet the roll of distant thunder; though it had a faint resemblance to both. She heard it without being fairly awakened, and listened like one in a dream.

When it was repeated she raised somewhat in the hammock in which she was reclining.

"Madelaine!"

"Yes, dear."

Very sleepily came the answer, but it showed that she listened.

"I can hear either an earthquake, or the braying of of Mr. Foxton's mule."

"Well?"

The senorita hardly comprehended all that the statement implied.

"If Rhadamanthus is here, or whereabouts, where is his owner?"

The question brought Madelaine to her senses. "Sure enough! I was not awake yet when you spoke. You are sure it was a mule that he rode? But of course. I remember now, I saw it myself, but he was so far away I had almost forgotten. Then you think?"

"That our gallant knight is somewhere near, and that Rhadamanthus wants him. Perhaps something has happened? Perhaps he was here after all? We ought to make another effort to find out."

"The effort shall be made if I have to question every man, woman and child on the place."

Rhoda smiled at the sudden earnestness, but made a warning gesture.

"Not too loud, and not too emphatic. It strikes me that there may be some mystery here. Of course I don't want you to suspect too hastily, but if I were in your place I would not do the inquiring myself. You might only get the same answer over again. Get Jose by himself, and quietly give him his instructions. He is an honest young fellow, entirely devoted to you or I am very much mistaken. In an hour he can find out more than you would be able to do in a week."

"But what do you think? Heaven bless us, this is not a den of thieves!"

"I do not know what to suspect, except that it seems to be to somebody's interest not to have Mr. Foxton reach the ranch, or his presence be known if he got here. Jose, perhaps, can find out enough to explain the reason."

"The first thing, then, will be to find Jose. I suppose it will have to be done without any one else being the wiser. It seems ridiculous; yet we will try it."

"And the fates are in our favor. There is Jose now, with a saddle over his arm. You can stop him for a moment, as though to ask him where he is going, and no one will suspect what it really is that you tell him in an undertone."

"You are a terrible schemer, Rhoda, but you will find me an apt pupil. Wait a moment and you shall see me send our man on the trail."

Madelaine tripped away.

It hardly took the minute for her to give Jose his orders, of which he seemed to need no explanation. He nodded carelessly but his eyes showed his earnestness. He started first to look for the mule, and then for some intelligence concerning the mule's master.

Of course, after that there seemed to be nothing for them to do but to wait, and they did that so patiently that they almost forgot about the Fresh Sport.

They might be pardoned for that, since they felt, somehow, as though they had shifted the responsibility when they had launched Jose on the trail; when they met Raimondo he certainly did his best to make them forget everything but himself.

So pleasantly did the time pass that they were surprised enough when late bed-time came. The Don could be a very entertaining fellow when he chose, and this evening he chose, since the last thing that he desired was for Rhoda to suspect him, or fancy that she recognized him. The glimpse she had at Brace Box might or might not have left his image in her memory, much as he had changed his looks.

The few questions asked concerning her father were so adroitly worded that the Don appeared to speak only after the manner of one interested for politeness' sake. If he gained no information he showed no signs of being vexed.

So it was, after all this conversation and just when they were not expecting it, that they heard from Jose.

He did not come in person, but there was a light tap, and Madelaine admitted to their presence a young girl, who came forward with some hesitation.

"I have seen Jose," she said. "He has the mule, and he will see you if you wish. There was a strange senor here last night but they said he was a thief, who stole away taking with him horses of value so that he would be hung if caught. No one was to tell the senorita lest it might trouble her or make her afraid."

"And yet they said there was no one here!" exclaimed Madelaine. "Am I surrounded by traitors? Who was it that should dare to order this thing kept hidden. He a thief! It is an

old friend. He had just saved me over yonder at the mountains, at the risk of his life, and I have let him go away without thanks!"

"Pardon me, senorita, but I was away to-day. I would not have lied to thee. And, senorita, the man did not go away—he was taken."

The girl's voice dropped to a whisper. She looked about her as though fearful of some unseen listener, and motioned to Madelaine to repress her emotion.

"Whither?"

The senorita suddenly grew calm. She began to see something more than she had been willing to suspect in all this. Yet quietly as she spoke the word, there was a depth of passion underneath.

The girl pointed downward.

"If I mistake not thou wilt find him in the vaults below."

After that there was no rest from questioning until Madelaine and her friend had heard the whole story of how Teresa, being up at an unearthly hour, had seen the manner of Mr. Foxton's taking off, and had kept the secret, with many qualms at being its unfortunate possessor, until the shrewd questioning of Jose had sent her to her mistress.

Madelaine knew something of the vaults, though she had not visited them for years. They were extensive, gloomy, lonesome; she shuddered at the idea of visiting them in the night. Perhaps she shivered as much at what Raimondo would do.

"If he is there, alive or dead, we must find him," she said, looking up at Rhoda.

"If he was wicked as the worst, such a crime should not be done in my house. Yet, I own to you, I dare not openly demand his release, unless all other methods fail. With Jose we will visit the cellage. If my memory does not fail me, I know where to look for him. You will go with me, Rhoda, will you not?"

"He has never been my lover, but he has been my friend," was the ready answer. "And my friends can count on me through thick and thin. We must be sure to make no failure. That is the only thing I could fear."

The two grasped hands at that, and Teresa—who was puzzled at the unknown tongue in which the two conversed—was dispatched in search of Jose, who was found conveniently near.

The prospect of a journey to the vaults seemed to have no particular terror for him, though he shrewdly asked one question:

"Don Raimondo—should we meet him? What then?"

"Spill no blood if it can be avoided; but I have promised Rhoda that we will not fail. Three of us armed with revolvers should be able by threats to make one man stand aside. If not, then there is the lead."

It seemed hardly likely, with such a secret, so hidden, that the Don would sleep very soundly. The danger most feared was that he would be met with, prowling around to look after his prisoner. Very cautiously they moved, Jose in the advance and Madelaine following, with revolver in one hand, a bunch of master keys in the other.

Good fortune and the lateness of the hour served them well. They gained entrance to the cellage without meeting or hearing any one.

Then, by the light of Jose's lantern, they made their way behind a seeming barricade of casks, and found the hidden doorway that led to the cells beyond.

"Hist!"

Jose held up his hand.

"The way seems open—some one is here before us."

"Hide the light then, and let me lead. But keep the lamp lit. We may need it at any time."

Through the door they passed, and into the blackness of the narrow corridor beyond.

For a moment they stood there motionless, listening for the slightest sound that might indicate the presence of prisoner or guard.

"Come," whispered Madelaine.

"The cell I have in my mind is at the further end. If he lives, we will find him there."

Inch by inch, as it were, they advanced until, at last, Madelaine halted.

The silence was so intense they could almost—perhaps, altogether—hear the beating of their hearts.

"A light, Jose; turn up your lantern. I feel something before me and dare not go another step."

From under his cloak Jose drew the little lantern, silently increasing the flame.

Right at the feet of Madelaine lay a motionless man. His right arm was doubled under him, there was a great splotch of blood on his face, and on his breast was pinned a piece of paper, folded letterwise. There had been, most likely, desperate work—were they too late?

CHAPTER XVII.

KNOCKED OUT IN ONE ROUND.

VERY obligingly Raimondo left a lantern when he clanged to and locked the heavy door of the cell and departed.

Mr. Foxton had his wits about him very thoroughly by this time, though he had been as quiet

as a man of sense usually is when there is a knife at his back and he knows that it will go in at the first struggle or noise.

When he was alone he opened his eyes and looked around him.

"Mighty clever man that Raimondo is; though it's a toss-up whether he obliged me with a glim to cheer my solitude, or to show me there's no possible chance to escape. With this chain around my waist, and that staple in the wall, the chances look slender enough for yours truly to be satisfactory even to the Don. And then those doors and that passage, and nobody knows who at the other end of it! Yes, Mr. Foxton, if Carjador means it you're elected, and that's a fact."

So Frank Foxton thought; and the principal question remaining, was, what Carjador really meant? He intended to come back or he would not have left the lantern; but what would he do when he came?

There was plenty of time to consider, and to gain an appetite, for it was fully noon the next day when a dark-faced Mexican came slipping along with a lantern, a basket of provisions and a jug of water. He entered, crept cautiously toward the Fresh Sport, and, exchanging the lantern, deposited the food within easy reach. Then he went out as silently as he entered, and Foxton fell to with right good-will.

"One meal a day, and the supply of water limited! Certainly it is time to be seeking more comfortable quarters."

So Foxton reasoned; but as he had been trying for a dozen hours to get rid of the band around his waist it was no very new or brilliant conclusion.

"A big mistake, I made, when I filled myself up with his provender. The longer I did without it the slimmer I would have got. Why, in a week or so I would have been able to jump right out. Once out of it and this cell wouldn't hold me. Confound it! If the man it was made for had been a trifle bigger, or if I had been a trifle smaller, the Don would never have seen me again until he met me on the war-path."

Foxton seemed hopeful even then. The Don certainly could not have guessed what sort of a man he was or he would not have left him quite so much alone, or would have been more careful of his own precious neck when he ventured near him.

Carjador came, sure enough.

When he left the presence of the ladies he went straight to Frank Foxton.

What it was that he had to say was destined to remain forever a mystery. The sport waited until he was just in proper distance, and then his fist shot straight out.

Raimondo knew some little about the prisoner, and had what he considered proper respect for his prowess; but knowing next to nothing about shoulder-hitting he would have sworn that such a stroke was impossible.

It caught him on the neck and hurled him back clear through the open door of the cell.

"Lay there, old man. I've evened up a little on you, but it's an everlasting pity I couldn't have knocked you the other way. You ought to have the keys I want in your pockets, and I should have prepped you up against the wall so as to have you at my leisure. Bet you a dollar I'd have put him in my boat, and sailed out in his. And I might have had the chance if I had waited. No use! The boys are never wrong. I am just too fresh for anything, and I deserve all I get. But it does a man good to see him lie there anyhow. Hello! He begins to move. Must have hit him too high up though my knuckles don't feel much like it. Ah!"

Mr. Foxton had been carelessly leaning against the wall, watching the victim of his stroke, but now he braced himself up. He heard no footstep in the passage, but some one was there, who had lifted Raimondo and was dragging him toward the light.

"Huff's an' horns!" exclaimed the newcomer. "Hit ther tack ther fust rattle. Plumb center fur Bob Jones! Tell yer, boss, when I'm hired by ther month, I ginerally 'low ter kerry my end ef it's ther northeast quarter of a coffin. I'm a leetle late, mebbe, but I hed ter nose 'round a bit afore I could find yer ter 'port fur duty."

The sport was astounded, to say the least; but that did not prevent his feeling glad all over.

"Couldn't have hit it better, old man; and I'm gladder to see you than flowers in May. Don't stop to shake. Feel in the gentleman's pockets for the key to these shackles, and then pass me his revolver. How in the name of the great five aces did you nose me out?"

"Coming up ter report 'cordin' ter order, but I come kinder keerful, an' war lucky ernuf ter heyar a leetle chin-chin. A feller hed seen yer mule, an' war axin' whar mou't be ther owner ov it. He hit ther leetle Mexican maiden wot' knowed all erbout it. Mebbe he'll be 'long by'm-by, an' mebbe he won't; but I come, right now."

Jones worked as he talked. The shackles fell off and Foxton recognized the revolver that was placed in his hand as one of his own.

"Correct you were, and as they don't seem to want me up-stairs, and I don't fancy staying down-stairs, I think I'll leave instanter. I'll be

out a Winchester and other firearms; but if I can find Rhadamanthus and my saddle all right, I'll forgive him for them till I get a chance to put in my bill. I guess you know the way out better than I do, so put your best foot forward."

There was not a bit of delay after that save that Foxton hastily scribbled a note and pinned it on the breast of the still insensible Don. About the time Madelaine and her friends were cautiously feeling their way toward the vaults the sport was adjusting his saddle on Rhadamanthus, preparatory to making his escape good.

"A very elegant residence, Robert, and the people are just too hospitable for any use, but when I come to finish my visit I think I'll be sure that the proprietor is at home."

So they struck off from the building, leaving a couple of peons, who had been so unfortunate as to meet them, lying around loose in about the same condition as Raimondo Carjador.

Of course it was the body of the latter that Madelaine found, and she recognized him at the second glance.

"Is he dead?" she exclaimed.

"See, thou, Jose. I dare not touch him."

"Not so dead as he might be," interposed Rhoda, who was bending eagerly forward.

"I think he is regaining his senses. Here is a letter that may tell us all that we want to know. After the foul play of some kind that has certainly occurred you surely have the right to know what it says. As for Raimondo—have no fear for him. I have seen men before that had been knocked out and that is what is the matter with him. His neck is not broken, his heart beats, and this blood is only nature showing itself at his nose. It might have been more serious, otherwise."

Until this matter was more thoroughly understood the Don was not likely to receive much sympathy. Gentlemen who descend to act as unauthorized jailers are apt to lose favor with the fair sex; while Jose did not like the Don anyhow.

"Read it, read it!" exclaimed the senorita, who had been taking a glance into the vacant cell.

Jose held up the lantern while Rhoda read:

"MY DEAR CARJADOR:—

"You have found out what an American can do—even in chains. I might leave you as you left me, but I don't care to handle a man who can't speak for himself. When we meet again it might be best for you to look out for your scalp. I got away with your friend Wilson, and after that you can consider your chances. Yours,

"FOXTON."

"That will do," said Madelaine. "There is war to the knife, henceforth, between these two gentlemen, and just now my sympathy is against my unfortunate relative. We will put the letter where we found it and allow Raimondo to take his own time for reviving. But remember this is a secret. Not a word of it to-morrow, but be on guard."

They all fitted noiselessly away, and just in time, for Raimondo was reviving.

It was some little time before he could sit up, rub his neck tenderly, and stare around in a dazed, wondering way.

He did not suspect the escape of the prisoner, much less the late presence of the senorita and her friend. When at last he had recovered sufficiently to glare in through the open door, he saw the empty shackles and then the note pinned to his own breast.

He read the parting words, and his profanity was entirely too deep for utterance. Very quietly he picked up his two lanterns and made his way out by a hidden passage, that led from the cellars to a concealed trap-door in a little summer-house.

Just outside of the summer-house he found one of his men, senseless as he had been, and not quite so well posted as to what had struck him. He was satisfied, then, that Foxton was beyond any silent pursuit, and he did not want to sound anything like a general alarm. A couple men more or less in his confidence was one thing; and Madelaine and all her retainers let into the secret was another.

And then he was rid of the Fresh Sport, anyhow. No doubt Foxton would retire some little distance, if not beat a retreat altogether. There was a chance to strike him before he could see the senorita.

Unfortunately for the Don's plans the senorita had already seen the sport, and had he known it, the masterly silence she had maintained in regard to the adventure would of itself have seemed to him suspicious.

He was thinking in some such way as he poured some brandy down the throat of the senseless man, and tried to bring him to his senses.

The fellow opened his eyes at length, gave a few gasps, and then staggered to his feet just as Raimondo had done.

When the Don asked for an explanation of the plight in which he had been found he muttered something about having been kicked by a mustang, at which the Don smiled grimly.

"Hold to that story then, to-morrow, when thou art questioned, for some answer must needs be ready. Get to your quarters and be silent about the American."

Then Carjador having the entree at all hours, went off to his own apartment a badly baffled man.

CHAPTER XVIII.

RAIMONDO SHOWS HIS HAND.

Of course, the Don saw nothing of the two young ladies, as he stealthily approached the house, and little dreamed that they were watching him.

It was something of a surprise to see him coming that way, for they had firmly expected him to appear from the cellars direct. It showed that there was some other way of egress than the one by which they had returned from their expedition.

However it showed also that Raimondo had most likely given up all idea of pursuit, for the night.

"There is some satisfaction in knowing that he has not dared to follow; or else could not find the trail. And to think, Rhoda, that I told the little fellow that, while there never lived a gentleman better fitted to carry on his side of a flirtation, he would be of no earthly use in such a country as I lived in! How he must to himself, have laughed at me."

"But perhaps, at that time, you only told the truth," said Rhoda.

"You know that was a good many years ago?"

"Not so many as it seems, my dear. And I think his education was pretty well completed even then. It would have been so easy to explain, yet he only answered dryly. 'Perhaps you're right, but I'm an awful fellow for fun—don't you know?'"

"Well, you know more about him now, and I expect your knowledge is only just beginning. And Madelaine, be frank. Who is this Raimondo Carjador, and what is he to you?"

"Not another word to-night, pet; but tomorrow I am going to tell you all about it. Go to sleep like a good child, for the present there's no one in danger."

There was not so much of the night left to sleep in, but they made the most of what remained, and being young were fresh enough and fair the next morning.

The Don was ready for them, with his respects, but looked pale and heavy about the eyes. Mr. Foxton had been as good as his reputation, and that said he could hit hard enough to drive a spike.

Rhoda watched him more keenly than ever, since she had now recognized him as the companion of the Chief of the Black Eagles, whom she met going into Brace Box. This man seemed to be dangerous to everybody—to Madelaine, to her father, to the Fresh Sport, to herself. In spite of his courtesy she shuddered inwardly when he addressed her, and almost wished that the blow of the night before had been a little harder.

"I leave you to-day, senorita," he said, in his silkenest manner.

"I have been away from home so much that my affairs press me and I can spare no longer time."

"Yet I thought it best to look after your affairs first—and they seem to be in very good state—then to tell you some things I have learned of late, and which you should know. Grant me a few moments of your time before I leave."

"With such serious preface it must be something alarming thou hast to say. Yet will I try to bear it. My time is at thy disposal."

Though her eyes twinkled as she spoke, she shrunk from the interview. What it would end in, was not hard to guess.

Still, she kept up a bold front, and when the Don galloped away, some fifteen minutes later, there was a dark scowl on his face that savored more of hate than love.

"I am afraid I have come at a bad time," laughed Rhoda when her friend rejoined her.

"But for me Mr. Foxton would have been an honored guest; and now I have driven Carjador away in despair. I begin to think I had better hunt up my friends in the mountains."

"Because, if you find them you will probably find Mr. Foxton at the same place. If you did you would hardly be generous enough to inform him that a welcome awaited him at the Banzos Hacienda. There, Rhoda, forgive me! I did not intend to be snappish, but, really, I have been worried beyond endurance. If any other girl was in the same predicament I would say she was in danger of her life."

"An elegant place to come visiting," retorted Rhoda, just on the verge of something like bad humor. "If you are to be murdered what is to become of me?"

"Nonsense! No one would think of harming you—or me, either—while you are around. Come! Forget what I have said. I will summon Jose and we will have a gallop over the plain before the sun gets too high."

There was a warning little gesture as she spoke that induced Rhoda to yield. There was a listener, somewhere, that could not be trusted.

Once on the plain and Madelaine's mood changed. She was in the best of humor, and with courage for a dozen. She hardly thought it necessary to name the dangers she had said so

lately threatened her, though she told her story at last, without hesitation or circumlocution.

"Well, Rhoda, if you must know, the Don wants to marry me; and I don't think he will be very particular as to the means he uses to accomplish his end."

"He is frightfully jealous of poor Frank, because I told him some months ago that he was the only man that I could care for. If I had believed for a moment that he would ever turn up here I should never have been so foolish. Of course I believed that he was dead, or the past was forgotten."

"But, Madelaine, he is your guardian, or something of the kind; and I am sure I thought he was your uncle. He is years your elder. He must be wild to entertain such a notion."

"Not so wild, either, if you look at the other side. He is only a relative, so far as being a younger friend of my father makes him one; he has had the management of my affairs for some years, and will have until I am twenty-five. I can't get rid of him if I wanted, free as I seem to be; and as there is half a million, more or less, belonging to me, on certain conditions, he has no idea of dropping me."

"Unless he has used up the better part of that half million and wants to conceal the fraud?" suggested Rhoda.

"If the millions were gone I think he would go too. It is not what he has had but what he has not had, and not only intends no one else to have but himself intends to have! How is that for an explanation? If there was any one else in the college that learned in three years more of a foreign tongue than I did I am not aware of it."

"Don't be so flighty, Madelaine. I begin to think Raimondo will turn in the end. Then you are not afraid for your life, after all?"

"Well, there might be a mistake. When a gentleman begins by depriving an unwilling lady of her liberty it sometimes ends in the decaise of all parties concerned. If Raimondo would only take no for an answer."

"I am afraid," said Rhoda, slowly, "that you think too much of the dashing villain. He is a worse man than perhaps you believe. I know that he offered the outlaws who captured me a large price for Mr. Foxton's life; and I believe that he wished to have taken my father's life and mine. I understand that he has control of your property, and not of you?"

"That is it. My poor father made his will in that way. So far his wishes have been very fairly carried out."

"Take my advice, then. Run off! He can't make away with your property—the law will not let him. He will be compelled to allow you a decent support. In a very short time you will be master of your purse as well as person. Or, if you can be any the happier, take Mr. Foxton at once and put an end to the villain's chances."

Madelaine shrugged her shoulders.

"This Mr. Foxton seems like an *ignis fatuus*. He shines a moment and then disappears. Perhaps you can tell me where I can find him?"

"Let him alone. If he is in earnest, as I think he is, he will find you, fast enough. I begin to be afraid for myself, and to think I ought to warn my father. Suppose we start in and follow his trail now? I will wager that Frank will come into our camp not over an hour behind us."

"I wouldn't mind the journey to the mountains, but I would hate to find Mr. Foxton there. As near as I can gather from your accounts there is little to choose from as between him and Raimondo on the score of morals. And for residence in Mexico the Don is a great deal the more available. As to warning your father—of what are you to warn him?"

"That Raimondo is here. If he knows that much he will be on his guard."

"Against what?"

"Do not ask me for I do not know. Everything. Nothing. After what has happened I know not what to expect except the worst."

The conversation that started in just began to be very serious, earnest, if the expression on the girls' faces indicated anything.

Madelaine drew rein and turned to the rear, awaiting her attendant, who, from the setting out had been following at some little distance.

"Jose!" she said, as he came near.

"Not Jose, senorita, but Tomasso. Jose could not come on account of some affairs; therefore he sends me, his cousin."

"You look enough alike to be brothers, but so little have I seen of thee that I know not if thou art worthy of trust."

"Jose is my cousin, senorita, and as like we are as two beans from the same pod. To offer much is a kind of denial. Try me."

"Canst thou follow a trail two days old, some twenty horses and a wagon or two?"

"Whilst my mustang lives."

"And art handy with thy rifle, not being afraid to shoot if I tell thee?"

"I am first cousin to Jose. Thou shalt see."

"Cross, then, the great *barranca*, and find the trail, such as I have told thee, running south, beyond the foot-hills. It will be an adventure, at least."

The last sentence was spoken to Rhoda, who would have been more surprised had she not

known of old the impetuous nature of her friend.

Tomasso took the request as coolly as it was given. Without asking explanation he wheeled his mustang and, with a touch of the spur, shot out ahead. Had Raimondo been upon the roof of the ranch he might have seen the three shooting over the plain in the direction of the spot where Frank Foxton had emerged from the *barranca*.

The plain at large had been trampled by thousands of hoofs, cattle coming and cattle going, mustangs with riders and without them. There was no direct path or trail to be seen, and the *llano* was very broad. To strike the only feasible point from which to descend into the yawning gulf was not altogether an easy task.

Tomasso found it without ever slackening his gallop, during all the long ride.

"He knows whither he is going, sure enough," was Madelaine's comment, as their guide slackened up to speak a word of warning.

"Good Tomasso, hast thou ever learned to speak the language of the American?"

"Heaven forbid—though Jose did. But keep good hold on the head of thy mustang. A tumble here were certain death. If thou canst use those weapons that seem to hang so handy, be ready with them at all times. Betwixt the Apache and the outlaw, with certain other dangers, the way through the canyon is not always the safest."

"To say nothing of the fact that hotels are scarce, and we have no provision train with us. If we are really going to follow up my chance suggestion, there is a chance of our having a hard fight with hunger and thirst."

Rhoda's remark was to Madelaine; of her Tomasso, in a hesitating way, asked for an explanation. When he had received it, he laughed lightly, and threw up his rifle.

At three hundred yards there stood a yearling that had, in company with a few other cattle, dropped away from one of the herds that roamed the plain. There was no lingering on the aim. As the muzzle fell in line the report followed, and down dropped the yearling.

Like an arrow away went Tomasso and his mustang.

"Shall we dine now?" laughed the young man, in a few moments returning with a quarter of the unfortunate calf.

"The fare may seem slender, but thou wilt not starve; and as we go, we shall find more of it."

Then he showed a haversack of hard, dry cakes, and a little package of salt. He was an invaluable attendant, as Madelaine told him.

Both the young ladies disclaimed any present hunger, however, though he was bidden take good care of his commissariat. After this practical display of the manner in which he provided for emergencies, they were about to begin the descent into the *barranca* when a word of warning caused them to take a backward look over the plain.

Half a dozen horsemen were racing straight toward them from the ranch.

"Raimondo!" was the exclamation of the young man, and Raimondo it appeared to be.

"He rides in no good humor—is it to overtake us?" asked Rhoda of her friend, who seemed even more interested than herself.

"I fear it is," answered Madelaine; "but he shall have a long chase and a fruitless one if we can make it such."

"The villain," she added, muttering to herself in an undertone. "Did he think I would not believe in his threats when he afterward tried to explain them away? I shall prove him a liar, though he has to be shot to do it."

Then she struck her mustang sharply with the riding-whip she carried, and dashed first of all down the dangerous decline that led into the *barranca*.

"Hold hard!" shouted Tomasso after her, urging his own steed in pursuit, while Rhoda, confident that she would not be deserted, followed more cautiously.

Nor was Miss Raleigh mistaken in her conclusion, though her reason for it proved wide of the mark. Madelaine was not thinking of her just then, nor for ten minutes afterward. The sure-footed mustang she rode bounded down the steep and rocky way with certain, catlike bounds, until the very level of the *barranca* was all but reached. Then, with a sort of terror, he thrust his fore-feet straight in front, and halted more quickly than if he had been stricken by a bullet.

Practiced horsewoman as she was, the senorita had thought nothing short of an earthquake could unseat her. Here the incline of the trail was sadly against her, and with a cry of consternation she went sailing over her horse's neck right into the arms of a huge grizzly bear.

CHAPTER XIX.

TOMASSO BEATS HIS BOAST.

The mustang of Tomasso would have swerved—perhaps gone headlong down some twenty feet to the level of the *barranca* below—had not his rider been on the alert and quick to act.

Suddenly as the danger came, hands of iron were on the reins; knees of steel held the sides

of the frightened animal, while the long Mexican rowels were dug into its flanks, so that its swerve turned into a forward plunge. As the steed of the senorita was in the way there was but one chance for Tomasso, and it was his good fortune that he was able to take that. A strong twist of the wrist sent his own horse hugging the wall.

There was a heavy shock, the riderless mustang was hurled bodily over the wall, a shrill scream arising from his lips as he went, and then the picture below was open to the *vaquero*. He had suspected the truth before, but had not thought it as bad as this.

Yet, as if his plans had all been shaped in his busy brain during the brief interval between the warning and the actual appearance of the danger, he did not hesitate, but drove right on. The lasso gripped in his right hand swung once over his shoulder, and then the noose dropped in a lightning cast over the head of the grizzly.

As the throw was made the spurs went in again, the mustang gave a terrific bound that would have unseated a less practiced rider.

The leap carried him past the object of his terror before he had time fairly to face it, and at a dozen feet he almost halted from the force of habit, for even in the excitement of the moment he seemed to be aware that a cast had been made.

Almost, but not quite, and in that instant Tomasso, knife in hand, sprung lightly to the ground.

The time was well chosen, for before his feet were fairly on the ground the mustang was away.

The mad leaps could last only for an instant. Before he had gone a dozen yards, with a sharp twang the tautened lasso brought him back to his haunches. Then the roar he heard spurred him forward as nothing else would have done; and then Tomasso was at work.

It was hardly giving "Old Eph" a chance, though he lost his prey by little less than a miracle. When the stout horse-hair rope flung him backward the senorita slipped from his arms.

That she had not ere this been slain was probably due to the fact that when she lay motionless in his arms he recognized that his danger was coming from above. When her mustang sprung over into the *barranca*, that distracted his attention. After that Tomasso had him; and with scant danger to himself, so long as he kept his nerve.

The mustang continued to plunge wildly, giving the bear sufficient of itself to think about, every second drawing him further away from where the senorita lay in a senseless heap. Around him hovered Tomasso, thrusting as he saw a safe opening, but biding his time, more or less, for the *coup de grace*.

That came at last.

Like lightning the *vaquero* darted in and brought his knife down upon the spine of the already severely wounded beast.

There was one great, convulsive flurry from which Tomasso fell back; but it was a great deal more rapidly than he desired. One paw of the bear struck him.

Had the claws got in their work it would have been a finisher. As it was he was as squarely knocked out as man well could be. The trio—Madelaine, Tomasso and "Old Eph"—lay in three separate heaps, each as motionless as the rest.

From above Rhoda came cautiously down. The pursuing horsemen were rapidly drawing near, and for her own sake, if for nothing else, she was bound to see what had become of her friends.

Her mustang was well trained, and to a certain point acted with obedience and care. Beyond that point he refused to go, doubtless scenting danger in the air.

Finished equestrienne as Rhoda was she did not care to make a struggle for the mastery at a spot where a mistake might mean broken bones or death. She flung her bridle over a convenient knob of projecting rock and continued to descend on foot.

When she first saw the bed of the *barranca* she shrunk back in mortal terror. The bear seemed to be the only living thing in view.

Fortunately, before she fled she saw the movement of the shaggy monster was caused by the mustang at the other end of the rope.

At that she ran down and looked at Madelaine, who seemed to have received no hurt unless the fright had slain her. There was no sign of blood or wounds, and Rhoda, who was rapidly calming, decided that she had simply fainted.

Then she and his mustang investigated the case of Tomasso. There seemed to be blood there and she almost feared to look upon a brainless skull.

Instead, she saw his eyelids flutter and open, the color come back to his cheek. He was dazed as yet, but his consciousness was returning.

That caused her to linger at his side instead of hastening back to Madelaine.

"*De diversion montones*," he whispered huskily, as he strove to draw himself up to a sitting posture.

"Yes. Heaps of fun," retorted Rhoda, giving him as keen a glance as ever flashed from her keen eyes. "But—did you kill the real Tomasso?"

"Who? What? No, I killed the bear."

"All very well; but I recognize you now, beyond mistake. Better drop that Spanish lingo and talk plain English. You are Frank Foxton. Now, what is your scheme?"

"Hist!" said Foxton, looking anxiously toward the senorita.

"Is she hurt?"

"No. Thanks to your courage, I believe she has escaped with a shock. I can see the color coming back to her face. It is high time you are both on foot, for the Don is getting dangerously near. I pray you have left no corpses at the ranch, for which they may hang you."

"Hang nothing—excuse the slang! I left fifty good dollars with Tomasso for his outfit; and, I swear, if I had had a glass to look in, I couldn't have told myself from the simon-pure. It was Jose put me up to the dodge, I confess. That girl overheard the threats of the Don, and told him. He had come across me lying out for a chance to get my hands on my Winchester, and he brought it out and gave me the hint. I saw a chance for fun, and here I am. If it's all the same, couldn't you let Madelaine acquire her own knowledge?"

"If you care to carry the farce further. But now, what is to be done? If this is Raimondo at hand, it is time that we were ready for either fight or flight—and you would hardly think of the former."

"Why not? I haven't a doubt that I could bluff the gang if that was the hand I got in the deal. But the senorita is a changeable mortal, and if it all seemed plain sailing, it's dollars to dimes she would give up this expedition, which promises lots of amusement. There! I'll be ready in a moment. Go to her while I round up the cattle. Let her taste this."

The mustang of Madelaine had taken its tumble like a mountain sheep, and was unburt. It was standing some little distance down the *barranca*, staring stupidly at what must have seemed a strange picture. To catch it and bring it to its mistress was no great trouble. With its bridle-reins over Rhoda's arm it stood meek as a lamb.

His own mustang was contentedly anchored to the grizzly, and appeared to consider the whole affair as one planned by Mr. Foxton. There remained nothing more to do but to bring down the mount of Miss Raleigh, and that was accomplished with little difficulty.

Foxton had no chance to hear what Rhoda had been saying to her friend, but he felt that, for the present, his secret was safe, when Madelaine so cordially grasped his hand, and murmured:

"Thanks, my good Tomasso, until I have the chance to fill thy pockets with *pesos*; and then thy courage shall not be forgotten."

"Nothing to speak of," retorted the fictitious Tomasso, coldly wiping the stains from his knife.

"Jose is a good lad; but it is as well he was not in my place. Mount now, for it seems that I hear hoofstrokes away off."

It was the same warning that Rhoda had just urged, and Madelaine did not slight it. Her strength had come back, aided very materially by a swallow or two of the contents of the flask the sport had placed in Rhoda Raleigh's hand. She scarcely touched with her foot the tips of Foxton's fingers as he tossed her into the saddle, while Rhoda was mounting unassisted.

"I had not thought so much time had been lost here, or that they were so near," thought Mr. Foxton, as he stood with hand on neck and pommel.

"Still, I'll stake a thousand that, with the weights up, we have the heels of them for the present. And when feet fail—derringers, do your duty. Oh, there will be fun by the cubic ton, or this court don't know herself, which she thinks she does."

The retreat once begun, Mr. Foxton brought up the rear. Madelaine of course knew of the trail that left the *barranca* on the opposite side, and it was safe to trust her to find it, though when the time came he would keep an eye out to see that she did not overlook the place. One caution only he gave the girls.

"Keep your heads cool. Remember that until they catch up with me you are in no danger, and if you get too far ahead you won't know when you are safe."

There was another and a better reason. Mr. Foxton did not intend to break up the horses in the very outset. While he had no especial desire for a fight with the odds so decidedly against him, he did not doubt that he could take such advantages of position as would counterbalance the odds and keep them at a distance, and he would do that sooner than lose his convoy by their steeds being broken down in the first day's burst. If they got no further than the other side of the *barranca* for the day's march, he would still be satisfied.

His orders were obeyed to the letter. With little conversation, and with now and then quick glances to the right and to the rear, the two girls galloped on, keeping just so far ahead

that they could faintly hear the clatter of the coming hoofs behind them.

Of course Raimondo would be gaining if he kept up the speed he had been showing on the plain, and anticipated their course sufficiently to follow into the *barranca*; but to a man like Foxton, that counted little. If the truth had been told he might have acknowledged that he was almost willing to be overtaken, so as to know just what he had to expect.

"They are coming, sure enough," said the Fresh Sport, after a long, silent gallop.

Behind him he could hear the clatter and cling of hoofs that were nearing rapidly.

Foxton never quickened his pace, since a glance about him had told him that the side track out of the *barranca* was not far ahead, and the ladies had probably reached it. There was little doubt but that he could be on the upward course before the party behind could come within pistol shot distance.

Nevertheless, it was something of a relief to see that Madelaine had made no mistake, but was already leading the way upward, though looking backward to see that he followed.

He swung his hand above his head to show that no halt should be made, and once fairly on the sloping ledge dismounted. A touch of the hand sent his mustang on, while he followed for some little distance on foot.

He remembered the lay of the ground very thoroughly. Just at the distance of long pistol-range there was a convenient nook, where he could shelter himself and yet command the base of the *barranca* wall.

Here he ensconced himself, his rifle at a ready; and here he had not long to wait.

Raimondo and his men slackened their speed as they came in sight. They knew the way better than the Fresh Sport, nor were they ignorant of the advantages in position that he might make the most of. As they gazed upward Foxton rose into sight.

"Don't crowd me, señors," he said, looking downward.

"The way is too dangerous for all of us to be on it at once, and if the attempt was made, some one would most likely be hurt. If I was in your fix I wouldn't follow a foot further, and that's a fact."

"Villain! Vile dog!" retorted Raimondo.

"Fire but a single shot and thou shalt be torn limb from limb, and thy heart given to the vultures. Throw down thy arms and surrender!"

"For a red-hot, raving maniac you do make the coolest proposals that ever went anywhere. See here, my friend, I have you where the fur's the very shortest. If I was after your life, men nor angels could save it. You couldn't hit the bigness of an elephant from down there, while I could drop every one of you with my repeater before your second shot was fired. Last time of warning! Fall back, or die."

Mr. Foxton looked like Tomasso but spoke like himself. The barrel of his rifle came down into his left hand, the muzzle covering Raimondo.

It was as good as a show, and Mr. Foxton smiled grimly to see the way the Don and his allies hunted cover.

"Good enough!" he thought. "I can keep them there until the girls have a chance to get out of range. Once clear of this hole in the ground and I suppose we are in for a scamper to the foot-hills. We can't stay up there forever to keep them down here. Ah! There's something not according to Gunter. What's up now?"

Rhoda had retraced her steps, and was calling to him.

"Look! Yonder!" she cried, pointing upward.

Right where the trail debouched from the *barranca* into the plain a little knot of horsemen were standing, their carbines at a ready, and their eyes peering downward as though they looked for some expected sight.

"Ah," said Mr. Foxton, "there's lots of fun in that. I may be a whole mile off, but if I was talking for truth I'd say I guess they've got us surrounded."

CHAPTER XX.

THE MAN WITH THE GUN GETS 'WAY IN FRONT.

MR. FOXTON might be one of the best shots in the world with both Winchester and revolver, and he might know it too, but he was not mad enough to think he could safely charge up the ledge against these men whose muzzles, if only held breast-high, would sweep the path. He might pick off one or two while they were peering downward, but if the rest fell back a yard or so they would have him sure about the time his head raised into sight.

"What now?" asked Madelaine, sharply. She might not have believed that these were Raimondo's men, and foes, had she not seen them handling their firearms in a way that betokened business.

"Shall we surrender, Tomasso, or hast thou some fair plan for escape? Speak quickly, for if thou hast not it were better for me to surrender to the Don, and make terms that you two go through unchecked."

The supposed Tomasso was cool as an iceberg.

With deliberation he rolled a cigarette and lighted it with flint, steel and fuse.

"Keep an eye on the villains above, and I will see that the Don advances not from below. It is a trap so long as daylight lasts, but when the darkness comes fear not. The rats will gnaw out and go free."

"But if they come down and the Don comes up, we, between the upper and the nether millstone, will be ground to powder."

"The Don comes not up while he sees that Tomasso is here. As for those fellows above, they will take good care of their own precious lives. There is no hurry for any of them. They can sit there a week if we be not starved out sooner. Oh, they would have us tight enough if they only knew how to work the trap."

"But how then can we escape?"

"Easily enough. When night comes I climb up yonder. A goat can go there—and Tomasso. I smite them hip and thigh, and the way is open."

The plan was barely practicable for a bold and skillful man.

At least, there was a threadlike path, clinging to the face of the barranca wall as it rose, until it disappeared near the top. There seemed a pretty strong likelihood of a broken neck and generally mangled body for any one that undertook it; but, by traversing it in safety and without discovery, one would come out in the rear of the men who were holding the trail. Whether these men would flee like sheep when attacked from behind, or whether one man could slaughter them all in case of resistance, were questions Mr. Foxton did not think it worth while to publicly discuss:

"I am afraid, Tomasso, thou art something of a braggart," said the senorita, looking doubtfully upward.

"So thought the bear, most serene highness. Darkness draws on, night is short, we will tomorrow talk it over on the way. So the horses break not away for water I guarantee the rest."

With that Madelaine was forced to be content.

The trio nibbled a few crackers, took measured sips from Foxton's canteen and watched above and below.

Fortunately they had not very long to wait else the nerves of the ladies might have given out. The idea occurred to them all, though no one cared to more than hint at it, that about the time (the so-called) Tomasso started on his flanking expedition the Don might be executing some like movement, or the men from above come pouring down in the darkness.

It was not the fear but the thought of this which caused Foxton to prepare for action the moment that darkness veiled the canyon.

Before starting he posted Madelaine where she could best watch the upper part of the trail, and then whispered a few final directions to Rhoda.

"Keep a bright lookout for the Don. If he shows up shoot quick, and shoot to kill. Your life and mine depend on it, whatever sort of a bargain he might patch up with Madelaine. And when I shout for you to come, don't waste any time, but come at once, as though the Don was just behind and gaining at every stride."

"But if you fail?"

Rhoda spoke anxiously. Such a thing might happen; and she had not the least idea in the world what could be done in such a contingency.

"Fail? Humph!" said Mr. Foxton, somewhat disgusted.

"I never provide for that. Do the best you can."

Then he drew off his boots and fastened them to his saddle, examined his knife and revolvers, carefully swung his rifle from his shoulder, and began his task by standing up on his mustang, and reaching up for the ledge, which ended abruptly just above his head.

Carefully drawing himself up he started on his journey.

During the daylight without seeming to do so, and perhaps without knowing that he did it, Foxton had carefully scanned the line of his intended march, noting where the way seemed plain sailing, and where the difficulties appeared to come in.

It was well that he did so, for now the darkness in the barranca was complete. He could not see a foot before him; and if he failed to remember what to feel for there was a chance for a fall of five hundred feet. There was rather more of a chance that somewhere along the route his untried roadway might crumble beneath him.

As he went higher the way would grow lighter.

This was his main reliance, since there was a great deal of uncertainty about the last part. The ledge seemed to end some fifty feet before the level of the plain was reached, and the Fresh Sport was taking it on credit that he could scramble up some way or other.

"I'm like to find bad enough breaks before I get them," he muttered; "but if I can once get that far on the road it would be a mighty bad run of luck that would freeze me out of the trail end of a winning game. Ahem! If I can't do any better I'll ask one of the fellows above to toss me a rope."

So Mr. Foxton slowly and surely won his way. His foot didn't slip; a twig didn't crackle under an uncautious step; he didn't hang suspended by one hand over the abyss, and feel the ledge's edge surely slipping from his grasp. He did not do business in that way.

When he came to the upper end of the ledge, he found that things were even better than he had hoped for. Coming from the gloom to the starlight he could see much better than he had dared desire, and there was a gully, washed through the solid earth, up which he could go with ease and safety.

It was, perhaps, a little too light; but that could not be helped. He unslung his Winchester and brought it to a ready, while he swiftly flitted up the gulch. A few more yards would bring him up to the plain; and then—

From above he heard the sharp click of hammers and a stern hail:

"Hands up, stranger! I reckon we've got you anyhow. Jest make a crooked move and the pieces all go, bang! to kingdom come!"

If the hail had been from the lips of a Mexican Mr. Foxton might not have felt especially concerned; but this was a full-blooded American that was talking, and the chances were that he talked by card.

Not a sign could be seen of the speaker, but he was evidently up, beyond on the edge of the plain. His words indicated that he held the drop, and doubtless he was backed by the balance of the party, or could have them at a word. The flanker had been flanked, and that to some purpose. His plan had been suspected and a regular trap laid.

All this went through the mind of the Fresh Sport like a flash. There was no use to make any display of his fire-arms, for the best shooter in the world has to have a mark to show his skill.

There was no chance to retreat since the task of getting down to the ledge was entirely too ticklish to be attempted in haste.

Altogether the situation was a very bad one, the only redeeming feature of which was that they had not shot on sight. The challenge by word instead of bullet showed that there was an opportunity to temporize.

"Go slow, pard! I guess you've got me, and that's a fact. What's wanted? When a fellow has tried to skin his way out of a difficulty over such a confounded route as I've been taking he's near enough broke up to listen to almost anything in reason."

"That's all chin and cheek," responded the voice. "You keep on crawling till you get to where we can take hold of you and you'll find out the rest. You're too good a man to be taken out of the wet just to please a Greaser—and I'll save yer life if I kin; but if you once begin frolicking with firearms salt can't save you, and I won't try."

"Oh, I know when the game is dead against me. Watch me close and see that you don't make any mistake, for, I swear, I don't want to pass in my checks when my hands are over my head just as high as I can reach. But I don't want to break my neck to get there. I'd sooner risk a 44 cal. than a tumble back yonder. Wouldn't you, now? Say?"

The answer was not just what Foxton expected, for it came in the shape of the sound of a good, solid thump. With his experience in such things, it seemed as though a hard club had been properly applied to some one's skull, and had sent the receiver endlong, heels over head.

Then there were shouts and yells, the rattle of firearms, and all the sounds of a general commotion, in the midst of which Frank Foxton dashed up out of the gully, his weapons in hand, just in time to see the horsemen who had been holding the trail go scampering over the plain, while a single man hastened their departure by a salvo from a double-barreled shot-gun.

This man turned to the Fresh Sport as coolly as though he had been practicing on clay pigeons sprung from a trap.

"Thar ain't no man as likes his rest better ner old Bob Jones; but when he's workin' by ther month an' wages paid in advance you kin 'most generally allus sometimes count on his gittin' 'round, long erbout sundown. Mebbe it wa'n't my chip; when yer puts an oar in, ther best plan's ter put it in mighty hard."

"Bless your old bones! You're just going 'round saving lives by the cord," was Foxton's hearty answer. "I don't know that I'm yearning for a partner that's frequently assisting when there's more than two to go; but I don't particularly object to his going it alone when he takes every trick. Wait a minute, will you, and I'll say, shake. I think my pards are coming. Please remember my name is Tomasso and you know nothing of Fresh Frank until further orders."

The last few words were hastily whispered; and Jones simply nodded, as up the trail from the barranca came Rhoda and her friend.

"Routed, horse, foot and dragons!" laughed Miss Raleigh, as she gave a hasty glance around. "But who have we here?"

"Which my name are Bob Jones, an' yours truly," said the man with the gun.

"Ther month ain't near up yit, an' I'm earnin' my wages the best I know how. Ef I kin be ov

ary use 'bout interferin' with my dooties ter Mister Foxton you kin jest name yer vanity."

Rhoda, who had a retentive memory and thought rapidly, believed that she recognized the man and nodded, approvingly.

"I did not think you were going to be of such direct, personal benefit to me," she said, "but it goes to show how we can be good to ourselves without knowing it, when we try to be good to others. I thank you very much if you have helped disperse our enemies, as you seem to have done; but we are under the care of this gentleman. If you wish to serve us further, and can take the time to do it, you will receive your orders from him."

Of course Rhoda and Madelaine did not know the particulars of the little affair, and so did not imagine the real extent of their indebtedness to the man with the gun.

"Here we can rest a little," interrupted Foxton, who did not care as yet to explain how badly his movement had failed.

"There is a fine fire started with the chips that are around us by the million, and we prepare supper, since to stop again may not be safe."

He was just as cool as though there was no Raimondo to force his way upward, and no chance of the panic-stricken party recovering their senses and charging back. He said nothing of the prisoner that he and Jones had trussed up, but he intended to examine him when he was in a more examinable shape. Meantime it was as well to prepare somewhat for the hard work that was before them, that might be fun for Mr. Foxton, but would be anything else for the ladies.

Even the reckless sport recognized that he had the labor of his life before him. With a man like Raimondo in pursuit, a gantlet of a hundred miles or more to run, and a floating party of treasure-seekers to find, the situation would have been difficult for himself alone. To guide two young and delicate women on such a mad excursion might have seemed a hopeless task to any one less hopeful than Frank Foxton.

Yet he would not have refused to make the effort for a million.

CHAPTER XXI.

AN HONEST DEAL.

MAJOR RALEIGH, having thought the matter over, had no idea of seeing Rhoda again while his feet were on Mexican soil.

It seemed to him that it was a lucky chance that enabled him to leave her in the safety of the Banzes Hacienda. Having once settled on this, he dismissed her entirely from his mind, pushing on with all the speed the expedition could make.

There was no effort made to hide the trail. With a party so large that could only result in failure if any one attempted to follow it. He was not unmindful of the fact that Carjador would compass his death if he could, and that if the Black Eagle banditti knew his mission—which he more than half-believed they did—they might, or probably would, follow.

Raleigh did not altogether object to their coming, for he had neither forgotten nor forgiven them. With the force he had with him he thought he could square accounts, and provide against trouble in the future.

The danger that he really did fear was from those he might meet, rather than from those who might follow. Rattlesnake's warning to Rhoda showed that his object was understood; and he knew something about the way the Indians had attempted to guard the secrets of these otherwise lonely recesses.

With them he had expected from the outset to have trouble.

For several days the little train wound along among the foot-hills.

No one was seen, save now and then a herder or two in the distance, perhaps searching for strayed stock. Then they plunged boldly into a pass that seemed to lead directly into the heart of the mountains.

So it seemed; but the trail led them higher and higher, until at last they stood upon the crest of an intermural range that was but little lower than those that flanked it.

Before they had reached this spot they had found a spring from which they had filled their vessels, and they were ready to camp where the wagons halted.

"We'll stop hyar ter-night," said Dave, carefully scanning the land beyond.

"Pears ter me things looks a shade diff'rent frum what they uster did, but ter-morrer we'll try er stroll through this bad ground. Ef I recomember right an' you ain't throwed off on me in this hyar matter, thar's some thirty mile ter travel thet's wuss ner a hundred sich ez we war throwin' behind us ter-day."

"I think we have hit the point, as you say," answered Raleigh, who stood at his shoulder.

"And yet it does not seem exactly as it did. In spite of all the years since last I stood here I thought I could recognize it at a glance."

Destiny Dave scratched his head as he looked around him.

"It looks kinder nat'ral; but wuss ner ever. In course, we'll leave the waggins ter-morrer er

next day, which was what we expected from their outstart. If we kin only figger it out ter git along ourselves I'll be thinkin' their run ov luck are better ner it looks."

"It don't seem as though foot of living man ever pressed that ground. Are you sure we have made no mistake?"

"Ef I sabbe what yer' drivin' arter thar ain't hin no mistake so fur. When I know a thing I'm bettin' on it that I know it. Ef anything hez gone wrong it's ther mountings theirselves. Don't it look ez though thar's a piece dropped off, over yonder; and a piece er two piled up thar? Sence you an' I've be'n hyar ther hez bin a shakin' up, er I'm a bald-headed liar. Now, don't yer fergit it."

Dave slapped his thigh vigorously as he spoke, and pointed with his left hand.

Raleigh followed the gesture, took in the points of the landscape, and was more than half convinced.

It gave him a shock. An earthquake in these regions was the very last thing he had thought of as standing between him and his buried treasures. Men he could fight, but if fate was going to take a hand and play in the game against him, what hope would there be for him to win?"

"It does look something that way; but not a word of that to the men. I made a mistake in organizing so large a party. With you and Old Sirene I might have accomplished the work with more safety and less expense. We can stand a sudden attack better, but for a siege or flight, if we find an enemy in force, we are all the worse off, especially in this Heaven-forsaken country. The willfulness of that girl governed my plans, and then she slipped into safety just when the danger began. A blessing that she is not here if we have trouble in finding the canyon of the cache."

"Find it or not, this hyar ain't no good place fur a gal. We kin rustle 'round fur ourselves, an' be all right, but it's diff'rent with weemin. But thar ain't no use ter chin ary longer now. To-morrer night we'll know all about it."

With this assurance the conference closed. With the men in their present mood it did not do for the two to be seen talking by themselves too long. The trip had already taken longer than was expected, and the difficulties in the way were just beginning to show themselves. If they once suspected that the major was either losing his grip, or growing doubtful of his course, there was no telling what sort of an emeute might follow.

Had they known, or had Major Raleigh known all the facts in the case, they might not have felt easy about waiting for the solutions of the morrow. There was no danger in sight, and no surface indications that it was coming, but there was a hand behind the curtain that was beginning once more to pull the wires.

In other words, Raimondo was on the track.

When he returned to the Banzos Hacienda with half a dozen of his own men, whom he had found waiting for him at an appointed spot, he learned that the ladies, with no escort save a young *vaquero*, were out on the plain.

It gave him the double opportunity he longed for, and without any hesitation or disguise, he swung away in pursuit. The men who win, in that country, are the men who need not fear to face the world.

Of Tomasso (the real), he knew but little; when he came across the body of the bear lying in his way his respect for that humble and almost unknown youth increased about a hundred-fold.

He did not yet anticipate any serious resistance, but if it seemed to be coming he was quite ready to meet it cautiously. A man who could slay a bear in single combat might even slay him.

But when he cautiously, if hastily, approached the spot where a stand could be made to advantage, and recognized the voice of Fresh Frank, he stopped instant. He began to think there had been a mistake somewhere, and he had no desire to set himself up as a target for Mr. Foxton's marvelous shooting when there really seemed to be no need for it.

There were some men on the plain above whom he had signaled.

These men knew both Rhoda Raleigh and the Fresh Sport, and would, if they captured them, hold until he came to take them out of their hands.

It was a trap as good as any he could have set, since the fugitives could not come out above or below without capture, and could not remain in any great length of time without starvation.

This, more than actual fear to risk the promised bullets, caused him to wait so patiently.

"If our friend above," he thought, in substance, "takes them it will put him in good humor, and hardly make him a whit more extortionate. In any event a night in the *barranca*, perched on that narrow trail, will do as much toward bringing Madelaine back to her senses as anything I know of."

A short time after dark he heard the faint notes of a fusillade above. They ceased almost as suddenly as begun. He doubted not that the crash of firearms meant the death of Frank Foxton, and with him out of the way there could be no trouble about the rest.

He was going upward quite gayly when he heard the voice of the Fresh Sport.

"Sorry for you, Don, but I've been there and that's a fact. I couldn't think of letting you up an inch higher. If you understand what is good for you, you will keep your linen untorn until to-morrow morning. We are going to vacate this camp just about daybreak, and after that you can have it to work at your pleasure."

The Don cowered back into the shadows. He did not redescend, but he kept himself invisible, wondering how the always lucky Mr. Foxton had got himself out of the remarkably bad box he had dropped into.

When perhaps an hour had passed away, without sign or sound, he made a cautious effort, and reached the top of the *barranca*.

The fires had burned down, and Mr. Foxton and the rest had quietly taken themselves off.

There was just one living thing there and Raimondo came very near to missing that. When he had found his friend, John Wilson, lying there, trussed up like a fowl for the spit, he recognized that his antagonist had a fund of resources to draw on that was even larger than he had expected.

The captain of the Black Eagles was raving. The worst of it was that he knew nothing of how he had been foiled. One minute he held the drop on Fresh Frank; and the next he knew nothing.

Vainly the two hunted around for a few moments. They could find no signs of a trail except that made by Wilson's own men in their panic-stricken retreat.

By mistake they followed that for some little distance, and then fell upon a survivor, who was cautiously returning to see what had become of his captain.

There came very near to being a case of mutual misunderstanding, but fortunately for each other recognition began before the shooting, and then Captain Wilson had a chance to express his opinion, which he did without any hesitation.

"Looks rough, boss," was the man's answer; "but it war ther best I could do. Thar was a hull regiment kim down on us ter once, an' they shot like blazes. Bart hez it in his thigh, an' Dandy bezn't much ov an arm left ter speak ov. It war jest blind, hog luck thet helped 'em ter git out ov range, an' I bin a bindin' 'em up ever sence. Jest as soon ez I could leave 'em fur a leetle I come sneakin' back ter look what hed become ov you. Angels wouldn't, er couldn't, hev done no more. I warn't fergittin' you, but ther big chance war thet you hed gone under; so I jest stayed by ther nearest, which I knowed war livin'."

"And you mean to say you didn't see anything of where the regiment went to. They weren't hardly angels; but I'll swear they didn't leave any tracks."

"Nary thing did I see ov them. I war too busy. It ain't no easy job takin' up a trail at midnight, unless yer know whar they're goin' to."

"That's a fact," said Wilson, turning to the door.

"Unless you can tell which way they intended to head after leaving the *barranca*, we may as well camp for the night. We can cast around here till daylight and not find a thing to travel on. I suppose I must look after my boys. As I'm in the same boat I can't swear at them for getting scooped, and I only hope they're not as bad as the first report."

An idea came to Raimondo. He spoke suddenly:

"How many men have you within an easy distance—that you could gather before morning?"

"Eight, without the two that are laid off for repairs. Do you want us?"

"Yes. To try to follow the trail to-night is useless; but there is a chance to get first to the other end of it and gather all in together. The way it looks now, it has been fortunate that we failed; but who would have suspected that the child would go off in such a mad chase?"

"Your game then? Speak it out quick, and speak it out square. You don't want to try any foolishness with the boss of the Black Eagles. Remember, I was in waiting for you here; but I don't back your cards until I know that it pays me to throw up my own hand."

"Toss it up then. The man knows where to lay his hand on half a million. I furnish my own men—we capture him on the ground, and divide the spoil. The foolish girls are following him, and we save them too."

"It's a bargain, though you get the biggest share of the spoils. It's lucky I don't take much stock in the other sex, or I'd drive a harder bargain. In two hours you can be ready for the road, and you want to take mighty good care that you don't lead me into a snap. If I find you play me false I'll kill you anyhow. You've told me so many lies with this bonanza business in your brain that I never know when to believe you, so I'll keep my eyes open all the time."

But Raimondo was trying to make an honest deal, at last, and intended to be as good as his word. He received the threat without flinching; and a couple of hours later took the lead with-

out hesitation, riding straight as the crow goes. No wandering for him among the foot-hills.

So it happened that Major Raleigh was out-paced, and that in the canyons beyond more than one enemy lurked, waiting for him to unearth his treasure before making their swoop.

CHAPTER XXII.

HEADED OFF.

ANOTHER day's journey hardly bettered the position of the explorers, though the major knew they were nearing what should be the end of their journey.

It was a day of hard travel and slow progress.

Twice they had to own themselves beaten at one point and retrace their steps some little distance to try from another. Had not Destiny Dave found a spring gushing from under a rock in the most arid of mountain wastes, just at the time and place he prophesied, there might have been mutinous work in the little camp that night.

Very good men of their kind had Raleigh gathered together, and very good wages had he promised to pay them; but they were groping somewhere in the dark. Americans will follow to the end and back again when they know where they are going and pass their word. When they begin to feel that they are, so to speak, being led by the nose they sometimes make things very uncomfortable.

That was the trouble here.

Raleigh had engaged them to take possession of a mine, and had frankly stated there would be a spice of danger about it. He agreed to run the risks with them, and if it turned out that it was unwise or impossible either to take or hold the bonanza, that he hinted at, he would lead them in retreat, and their pay would go on until they got back to their starting-point.

They were ready to start on the back trail now.

Had Rhoda been with them it might have been different. With a delicate young lady along it all seemed like a picnic. When she dropped off it made the danger more plainly visible, and the hardship a great deal more difficult to bear. If Destiny Dave had not been known, and the major suspected, to be had to fool with it is more than likely the discontent would have been spoken a great deal more freely.

There were some expressions of pleasure when they heard what Raleigh had to say after the day's march was over; and all but the outside guards were gathered in the center of the camp.

"One day more at the outside, and then, when there is another march, it will be toward home. There are landmarks enough to recognize, but I won't deny it, boys; there has been a shake-up that has turned things well topsy-turvy since I was here. To-night, though, Dave and I can see things pretty straight, and have got up a programme to correspond. The wagons will be corralled here, with a guard; and the rest of us will go on. If the road turns out to be as good as we hope, it won't take long to get everything bunched together again. And I wouldn't wonder if, by noon to-morrow, we had reached the end of our journey. The distance is nothing, if we can make the time."

"An' ef we don't strike a bigger snag than we've seen yet," chimed in one of the boys.

"Ef I know beans we struck Injun sign ter-day, an' yer gen'rally hits ther reds less than twenty-four hours later. Ob, thar's a heap ov fun about this hyar picnic; but fur glory it don't pan out wuth a cent."

"Don't be so doleful, Dan," laughed the major. "Everybody else feels good all over. No Indians are going to attack us. There can only be a small squad here, anyhow; and if the guards will keep their eyes open, I'll insure against any attack. If you feel like it, stay with the wagons to-morrow. I'd leave you all here and take a scout ahead with Sirene or Dave, but I know you are all dying to see what the promised land is like."

"Ef yer feels like it," retorted Dismal Dan—as he began to be called of late, "you'd better do it, then. Pop on double guards to night, and to-morrow go it alone, an' go it mighty keeful. I feel it in my bones that some one bes an eye on this leetle train; are all goin' ter make ther rifle?"

Dismal Dan spoke as though he meant it, and his warning impressed the major; for the man was an old plainsman. It was no secret that they were on Indian ground, and though the promise of Rattlesnake to Rhoda might mean a good deal as far as she was concerned, Raleigh was not so sure that it would hold after she had dropped out of the expedition. He answered slowly:

"It won't hurt anything to sleep with one eye open till we find out how the land lays, though et don't seem to me that the danger is any greater than common. I'd sooner have a tribe of red-skins than half a dozen mountain outlaws to rustle with. As to the double guard—I might have suggested it some time ago; but I don't want to put more on you boys than I must. To-night I sooner would than not. Dave will tell the guard off, and he and I will keep watch with you. You can rest assured

that I don't intend to be scooped at just the last moment. To-morrow we will hunt for the sign that Dan speaks of, and see what they amount to."

The result was, very little sleep for any one in camp that night; and as there was no alarm of any kind by morning, Dismal Dan's warning was a joke that everybody else felt sore over, and the major's decision that they should remain and rest while he and Sirene explored the ground thoroughly in front, was greeted with about as healthy enthusiasm as he could expect to see.

Their stock of provision was large enough to stand a siege, but the supply of fresh meat was low, and Indians or no Indians, some few of the boys intended to try their hand as soon as Raleigh got fairly out of the way. From the very start that morning they looked livelier than they had done for a week.

Raleigh would have preferred to take Dave with him to search for the *cache*, but he was needed badly in camp, and as it was only the general lay of the country with which he was acquainted, perhaps it was really better that he should remain behind, in spite of the major's preference. It left only one mind to make up about the ground to be explored, which was, perhaps, another advantage.

In the camp Destiny Dave could hold the men well in hand and if needed bring them along in Raleigh's wake as no one else could. He was the only man that had been thoroughly trusted so far.

Leaving everything in apparent good shape, Raleigh and old Sirene rode directly southward into the gorge that had been visible the night before, and whose broken floor seemed almost impassable.

Sirene shook his head as they entered.

"Mighty good chance to lose hoss-flesh ef we hev ter git back in a hurry! 'Pears ter me it mout be ez well ter leave ther critters an try it afoot-back. The fuder we go ther wuss it'll git."

"Don't worry about the road. It looks so from here, but unless there has been the biggest kind of a change it will be all the other way. It's a lonely old place we are going to; yet there ought to be something about it to make it beautiful to my eyes. I'll be woefully disappointed if I don't find it so. Hurry along a little. The road is not half as bad as it looks."

The major quickened his pace and old Sirene followed him closely without question. He was as wise as Dismal Dan, if he talked less. If there was any danger at all it was most likely to be found here. If he could have his choice he would not try this route at all.

The result, however, justified the predictions of the major. As they advanced the way grew smoother until at length it was like a floor, over which the hoofs of their horses clattered with a sound that seemed to roll far ahead of them through the narrowing defile.

Again the route led upward in a gradual slope, upon the crest of which, half an hour later, Raleigh drew rein.

"Take your stand here," he said, with some little excitement in his tone.

"Watch well, and if a living soul comes in sight fire your revolver at once. I will join you. This can be made as fair a man-trap as I know of. Though there are two ways out, you don't want to be long about taking one or the other when the time arrives to go."

"An' ef this end gits shut an' you skips by t'other 'un, when yer hears that shootin', whar am I goin' ter come out at? Pard, I does hate ter be left; an' ther boys hez bin sayin' thar's signs ov some one a-leavin'."

"Do you mean to say?" and Raleigh turned on him fiercely.

"I ain't sayin' much ov anything, but I'm meanin' a heap. Ef you think ov goin' at any time you'd better be arrangin' ter take Old Sirene along. He's bin livin' 'round ther border an' gettin' in sich snaps quite er few times, an' he's allers so fur come out a-smilin', w'ich ther same can't allers be sed ov them ez tho'rt he'd be left."

"If you talk that way I wonder what the rest can be saying? Sirene, I took you all on in good faith, paying big wages, and promising bigger if things turned out as I hoped. I expected to stay by you all till the sound of the last trumpet, and I mean it yet. Do as I tell you and it will all come right. Fail me and you throw yourself and your pards into more danger than perhaps you think for. This is my last caution; see to it."

Then he tossed his bridle-reins to Sirene, and striding down the further side of the slope was quickly lost to view.

"The old rascal would sell me out in a moment," was the major's thought.

"And yet, in his way, he's about as good as the average. I swear! If I find my bonanza I'm half afraid I will not dare to move it. The ungrateful curs are not safe to be trusted. I think Dave is stanch, however, and Sirene will be, as long as he sees plenty of ore in sight and not too much danger. Three good men could hold a dozen in check, while no blood has been spilled, and if danger comes from the outside they will fight it from instinct. I will not borrow trouble till I

see whether I can find my bonanza. Half an hour will tell, now."

Yet considerably over half an hour passed before the major found the little dingle he was looking for.

Had Sirene been with him he would have felt more surprise than he had yet experienced in his wanderings.

In the arid gulches and canyons a green leaf had been almost a rarity. Away above them trees had waved, to be sure, and there were signs nearer of other stunted vegetation.

That was all at a distance, and almost out of sight. Here, in the dell that Raleigh entered, there was an almost tropical verdure. It was forest and prairie, bush, copse, jungle, garden and parterre, with a spring trickling down the rocky wall and finding its way into a natural basin. At first glance it would have been hard to believe that the hand of man had not been at work here; yet human foot had scarcely pressed that sod for half a dozen years.

For a moment Raleigh stood on the outer line of the velvety green and gazed around him with a strange look on his face.

"Just so I saw it last," he muttered.

"The fairy ring, the haunted dell, the spot sacred to ghosts and medicine-men! It's like a sacrilege to think of Dismal Dan, Old Sirene and men of that ilk here. It used to be a spot of safety, but I am afraid their presence here would break the charm. Yet there is no time now for mooning. At the worst there's a fortune in those rocks beyond, but that takes time. Better to be content with a competency, such as ought to be here to my hand. Let me remember. Ah! Yonder is the memorial stone. A dozen paces from that, northeast by north—"

He stepped off the twelve paces as he spoke, and then knelt upon the ground.

A man of steel could scarce have helped showing some traces of excitement, and though he was a man of tried courage and varied experience he had nerves to boot. In addition, he knew some of the legends and superstitions connected with this spot, and somehow, just now they all came back to him. He thought of them as he had not thought for a dozen years, until he could almost feel a weird presence, and the fingers trembled, that held the broad banded knife he had taken from the belt at his waist.

"I've kept my oath, pard. It's a dozen years since we left here together," he muttered.

"It's not my fault if I come back alone."

"Not so very much alone," grated a harsh voice from behind.

"Sorry am I for you, pard; but we mean bald-headed business and nothing else. Hands up and nary a wiggle! We are the true partners in your little *cache*, and I reckon we're just in time to divide the bonanza. Much obliged to you for marking out the spot to dig fer it."

With a genuine thrill of consternation Major Raleigh recognized the voice of Captain Wilson, of the Black Eagle.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE FRESH SPORT BACKS HIS HAND.

A MAN'S thoughts can fly fast when he is in what he knows to be deadly danger. When the words of the road-agent captain fell on his ears, Major Raleigh knew that he was in a bad way. What he thought, though, was of something else that made him almost furious.

Knowing the ground thoroughly as he did, the major was certain of one of two things.

Either this man had slain Old Sirene, or the latter had failed to fire his warning shot as ordered.

No one was hidden on the way along, as he came. That he could have sworn to. To approach him from behind required the one who did it to have passed within plain sight of the one sentry.

"The man is a traitor after all," thought the major, and while he was doing so he quite forgot to obey the order, though his life might hang on his obedience.

"That's right," continued the voice, changing into one of banter.

"I see you haven't thought of pulling a gun, and that has been saving your bacon. Now, if you've thought it all over, last time of warning. Hands up—or drop! Choose what you want, and choose it quick, before I crook my finger!"

The major's hands went up at that, fast enough.

There was nothing else for him to do. He held only a knife. Before he could draw a revolver from his belt and turn to face this enemy he would be riddled.

"Got you where I want you; now, let's see what we make out of the hole in the ground. If it's not plunder and great coin, I'm away off my base. Don't try to wiggle or you'll never kick but once more. My pards, here, cover your craw, and it's an awful bad place to be bit."

The major understood that there was no use to attempt any escape for the present. Wilson strode forward and stood by his side, but there was something in his careless abandon that said there were men behind, without the click-

ing of the hammers that came to his ears and told that they were on guard.

"Your pards may shoot or not, just as they choose," answered Raleigh, coldly, for he had recovered from his surprise.

"If they do before you get done digging in that grave, I'll guarantee that you will shortly be ready to kick yourself for bringing them along. It begins to strike me you've been on the wrong scent altogether. Of one thing I can assure you. There is neither coin nor bullion here."

"You do that well, old man; but I'll chance it anyhow. Unless some one has lied most awfully, there's half a million somewhere near, lying around loose."

"Ha, ha!" laughed the major, mockingly.

"Set the individual that says it down as a liar. What there *may* be in yonder rocks I cannot say. As far as I know there's not an ounce of gold or silver within fifty miles. I have no objections to your putting the matter to the test. It will be a satisfaction to see your disappointment."

"For a solid bluff, that's about as good an offer as I ever struck, but we'll dig anyhow. I think I'll find more in the ground than dirt."

As Major Raleigh seemed to have been about to commence operations with his knife, Wilson used that weapon.

The ground was mellow enough, and moist. Without much effort he hollowed out a bowl several feet in depth.

Then the blade grated against a flat stone.

Wilson uttered a cry of satisfaction. He had not believed the major's assertion, and yet there was a sense of relief in finding evidence to justify his course. It would have been awkward to have fallen upon the major too soon. Had he been watching his prisoner's face he might have felt differently.

The flat stone was of good size, and slanted considerably. From its position one would have supposed that it was the hand of nature put it there if there had been no especial reason to think differently. It took some labor to move it from its place. As it turned out to be the lid or covering, of a stone box Wilson felt more assured than ever as he drew out a package, though his face fell when he observed the weight, and that it was the sole contents of the box.

It was a package done up in parchment, fold after fold and knotted around with strings of the same material.

Once opened a finer parchment was disclosed, on which there was writing in cochineal red.

An oath broke from Wilson's lips as he looked at one of his companions.

"Curses on it, Raimondo! The villain has fooled us after all. Read that and see."

The letters were heavy, as though they might have been traced with a sharpened stick; but the writing was clear and legible. It ran like this:

"We have this day made this agreement in regard to a certain *cache* we have together made. In case either party, or both, should escape, neither shall visit this spot, or the *cache*, singly unless upon actual evidence of the death of the other, for a period of twelve years from this month of August 1871. At the expiration of twelve years, either, not having heard of the other as living for five years, may appropriate to his own use, subject to a future claim of the other to one-half, the contents of the *cache*, upon first opening this agreement and writing hereon his name, the day of the year, and an address where he may be reached for five years thereafter. Either party appropriating the *cache* without complying with these conditions, entire, shall be liable to the heirs of the other for one-half the value of the *cache*, which would otherwise have been entirely his own. The consideration for this agreement is mutual assistance that has been rendered in an effort, not yet concluded, to escape from the Indians, among whom we have been prisoners for some years.

EDWARD RALEIGH.

NATHAN BUCKTHORNE."

"That's all right," said Wilson, as Raimondo stared at him in a puzzled way after reading the document.

"Now, Raleigh, where is the *cache*?"

The brusque, matter-of-fact question was only an off chance, and the questioner scarcely expected a much more satisfactory answer than the one he got.

"The world is wide and you seem to have plenty of time. Suppose you look for it."

"That's the line you're going to take, is it. Really, major, I'm sorry for you—just too sorry for any use. Because, you see, we'll get the information out of you anyhow, but as I have an idea that you're a man of some nerve I'm afraid that you'll be pretty nearly in small pieces before we get through with the operation. Better make up your mind to talk right off the handle. It's the same thing in the long run, only you save yourself."

"I suppose you mean what you say but you're just as wide off from the truth as a man can get when he's talking about some thing he hasn't seen. You will get no information from me."

"Spoken like a little man; and if I didn't know myself from the ground floor to the top-story I'd half believe you. But I'm used to dealing with refractory individuals. In my business we meet them quite often. What we

don't know about making a bird sing that can sing and won't sing needn't be mentioned. Why man alive! Just to take a turn or two of that rope around your arm would make you howl for mercy in less than half an hour. Then, there's the slow fire, and dragging it out of you with four horses. Why I could give a wild Indian lessons and not half try."

The deadly coolness of his threats might have moved some men, even then; but the major only smiled coldly. Whichever way the question in regard to the *cache* was answered he believed that he would not leave the spot alive; and Raleigh had not lived among the Indians without learning something of their stoicism.

"All right!" said the outlaw, changing his tone.

"Let it drop."

Right over the major's neck fell a noose, that tightened on his throat and then flung him backward.

"We'll try the simplest plan first," continued Wilson, swiftly binding the wrists of the prostrate man.

"This is a regular little garden of Eden. Even the trees are not left out. Drag him along and throw the end over that limb. We may as well choke him quiet while we build a little fire. It will give him something to think of when he wakes up."

There was no question about obeying the savage order, while Raleigh made neither struggle nor cry. In an instant he was dangling in the air, while Wilson watched him with an icy curiosity, till he was startled by a voice:

"Loads of fun in that, old man, but if you know what real happiness is you'll let him drop. No! You can't see me and it's the only time of asking. I've got you covered and I mean to hold you foul if you don't throw up on the game. Don't you do it or I'll plug you sure! It's Fresh Frank that is talking now."

At the first suggestion the major came down with a crash. Foxton's easy drawl was not hard to recognize. Then the captain glared savagely around in search of the speaker, while his hand went back toward a weapon. The little bit of amusement had thrown the operators off their guard, and they were taken without fingers on the trigger.

"Down he is," said Wilson, in vain trying to locate the noise. He suspected that its owner was playing some ventriloquial trick on him.

"Shows your sense. Now, see here, you know that when I pick steel I mean to kill; but I don't want to kill a man in cold blood if I can get along without it. As near as I can make out you haven't had much satisfaction out of him. If you had, I would have had to send you waltzing over the divide. I'll offer you a bargain, and you don't want to waste time. Skip back the way you came and I'll let you go."

"And if we don't?"

"It may be mighty rough papers on the major if you all carry the sand I think you do; but you'll die sure, and if my pards shoot straight I think the whole outfit will go up the flume."

It was evident that Mr. Foxton had a position from which he could see everything that was going on. He was not the man to offer such a gratuitous suggestion. He saw that in default of anything better Wilson had managed to cover Edward Raleigh. That meant that he intended to shoot him if the fracas began.

"You really mean that, do you?" he slowly asked, as though turning the chances over in his mind.

"Bet your last check on it, for you'll be sure to win. If I hadn't given my pards a say so, you'd have been down before this."

"Chip, then. I'm tired of being bluffed."

His hand raised visibly then; the muzzle of his revolver lying all the time in range with Major Raleigh's brain, while faintly along the canyon crept the sounds of a distant discharge of fire-arms; the noise telling as clear as could be that the major's camp had been attacked.

CHAPTER XXIV.

MADELAINE CHANGES HER MIND.

If half a dozen yards had separated them there might have been some slight chance for the major to get out living, if the shooting once began. With the hammer back and the muzzle not four feet away there could be no possible hope. A man like the captain of the Black Eagles has been known to aim and fire a fatal shot after receiving a wound from which he almost instantly died. If a dead man can shoot it has been done more than once.

Mr. Foxton knew all this, and would not have insured Raleigh's life for a dollar, at fifty per cent. premium. As a man of his word he would have, nevertheless, as coldly shot down Mr. Wilson for a commencement as he would have done a wolf that he had stalked down; and probably transferred his attentions to Raimondo and the remaining outlaw by the time they had located him through the flash.

As his brow contracted, and his finger was about to tighten on the trigger a hand grasped his and raised it steadily and firmly.

"One moment, wait!" said Madelaine, in a tone that reached the ears of all parties concerned.

"Perhaps we can divide the other camp. I have some little interest in Carjador, who is a guardian of mine, and who, I confess, has heretofore treated me well enough. I am almost willing to believe that so far his only crime is being found in bad company. I would save his life, which no doubt he would lose if the firing once began."

If the captain had only known of the gesture that accompanied her words he might have pushed the fighting all along the line, but the idea that he was covered by a revolver in the hands of a man like Frank Foxton gave him prudence. While he hesitated Raimondo spoke:

"It is on thy account that we are here. These demon Americans have bewitched thee. We know not which is the greater villain; but on both we would have vengeance. They have dragged thee away from home and friends, or they have lured thee toward a doom that one so young and pure as thou has never even dreamed of. To trample them under foot as we find them is scant justice to wretches such as they. When thou art in thy right mind thou wilt own as much."

The Don spoke with a fire and fervor that seemed too natural to be manufactured for the occasion; the senorita answered with an earnestness every whit as great, and much more real:

"Raimondo, thou art mistaken. The Americans have been my friends, and as such I would befriend them. The man thy comrade has at his pistol-end is the father of the girl I love most of all things in this world, and the other senor, whom thou styled a demon, has saved her life and mine not once only but half a dozen times over. Thou *didst* seek to take his life in the vaults under our hacienda, and he fled from thee in the guise of Tomasso, my *vaquero*. Had I known it was not he, not a step would I have gone with him."

"An honest senor needs no disguise. Had I not known what lamb the wolf was after I had let him escape. When I found him in the fold how could I?"

"It was a foul blot on our hospitality; yet, let that go. My friend feared for her father, and I, who would have given my life for her, thought nothing of daring the dangers by the way, of which thou knowest some, to place her again in his arms. To that end we followed his trail; and came none too soon. It is but a short time I have known it was Senor Foxton and not Tomasso, that led us, but well for us was it that so it was."

"And now, for all of us, there is danger in the air—and most of all for these friends of mine by whom I have sworn to stand. Behind us, in their camp, there is war, and they are needed there speedily. Stand aside, then, and let them pass. I will remain, and return with thee, so that thou goest at once, taking with thee all thy men. Take heed of thy answer, Raimondo, for it is thy last and only offer."

"And I want you to observe that this chin-music is not throwing me off my base worth a cent," interposed Foxton.

"I still have his serene highness, the duke of the Black Eagles, lined. The young lady last speaking is at liberty to make what bargain she chooses. If the other side don't carry out in good faith any promise they may make Frank Foxton will be heard from unpleasantly soon; there will certainly be one eye, and possible two, kept on the Banzos habitation."

The key to the situation was undoubtedly in the hands of Captain Wilson. Raimondo cast an anxious glance in his direction. He was not altogether certain what answer he should make to this proposition, since he did not know what the captain might think was treachery to the common interests of both.

"Accept," whispered Wilson. "The sooner we are out of this box the better. There is other work we should be doing. But I do hate to be bluffed by that infernal Fresh Sport."

"Madelaine, it is but to recover thee that we are here. True, I would kill the snakes; yet if thou sayest, let them live—so it shall be. Come! Over the back trail we shall go at once!"

"A fair exchange, then. Open the way. When Senor Raleigh is safe I shall put myself in thy hands cheerfully, since the object of my journey has been accomplished."

Wilson had been thinking everything over. It looked more profitable to have Raleigh living than dead, since his secret would live with him. Once dead and it would be lost forever.

In addition, there was too much of a chance that his own demise would not be far off. He had located the senorita by her voice; but was not so sure of Mr. Foxton. A dozen shots might not reach that gentleman who would be fatally busy meantime. He took up the thread of the argument.

"Somebody has got to do some trusting; if you won't we will. Foxton, give us your word that if we turn the major loose, you won't raise a hand against us or interfere until there's a new deal."

"Promise goes; turn him loose and send him up to the senorita. You can leave his tools there and he can get them afterwards."

The Fresh Sport did not seem to be overwhelmed with confidence, since he left his own

location as indefinite as ever. The captain, with a graceful smile, nodded to the silent Raleigh.

"I am happy to say that the interference came just in time to save your bacon. Of course the suspension of hostilities is only temporary. You are at liberty to withdraw."

From the moment that he knew Foxton was taking a hand the major had quietly waited. When Madelaine spoke, he knew that Rhoda was not far away, and her presence made him more cautious than ever. It added to the complications of the position. He would not have had her fall into the hands of the Black Eagle chief for the *cache* twice over. With such a weapon against him he would be powerless to fight.

"No thanks seem to be due, since the freedom comes in such questionable shape. Do you think that I would take it, or my daughter would sanction me in doing so at the cost of such a sacrifice by her friend? If Foxton will take my advice, he will shoot you dead, and leave me to take my chances."

Then the major looked the man firmly in the face, bracing himself a little, as though more than half expecting that the answer would be a death-shot.

"Unfortunately, Mr. Foxton has made his game, and has no use for outside advice. You will go as agreed on if I have to knock you down with a club and carry you there. Ain't that according to Gunter, sport?"

"All down but nine," laughed Frank. "If he don't start, bring him along."

There was a warning glitter in the eye of the outlaw, and he advanced his left foot until he stood in the easy attitude of a pugilist, his left elbow slightly swung back, his right dropped naturally as a guard. If he had not been so thoroughly wicked, he would have looked a very handsome fellow just then.

In answer Raleigh shifted his weight and easily threw up his arms to be ready for an attack. For a moment it looked as though the two would settle their differences then and there, with nature's own weapons, the fist.

"Oh, come off the roof, Raleigh!" shouted the Fresh Sport.

"There's a little war up at your camp, and if you don't want to be left had, you had better put yourself in the hands of your friends. You may make things lively here, but what's the use? The young lady is bound to go anyhow, and you're just losing the whole earth."

Yet the major might still have hesitated, but for the sudden action of Madelaine.

"Good-by, Rhoda, dear," she hastily exclaimed, her arms about Miss Raleigh's neck. Then, to Foxton:

"You are a different man from what I thought, and now I am afraid you are only too good for this country. Keep him covered till you see that they do not play me false; then, forget me."

And with her revolver in her hand the senorita sprang away, emerged from the shrubbery, ran down the slope, and in a moment stood by Raimondo's side, her left hand on his shoulder, her revolver held suspiciously ready.

"Now go," she said, sharply, to the major.

"Go at once, unless you wish to ruin us both."

"I am powerless to prevent, and can object no longer," he retorted, as, without a look at the others, he turned away. Evidently he was angered by the movement of Madelaine, and angered at himself that she had forced him to accept what he could only deem an appalling sacrifice. "You have my thanks," he flung back over his shoulder, "and perhaps you may yet be saved, in spite of yourself."

"Good-day, we're going now," nodded Wilson, casting a careless look in the direction he fancied Foxton to be.

"At present it looks like a kind of a drawn game, but I reckon we'll see you later. You manage to hold over me every time, but such a run of luck can't last forever. When it does turn I think it will make you weak."

Then Mr. Foxton was holding the dingle without opposition, gazing somewhat ruefully after the departing Madelaine, while Major Raleigh was holding his daughter to his heart.

CHAPTER XXV.

A CRY AND A CRASH.

OLD SIRENE was largely responsible for the complications just described. Depending upon him the major had been caught napping. Otherwise he would have had his eyes open, and would probably have met Foxton and his convoy. That would have made quite a difference in the fortunes of all parties concerned.

Sirene did not design to betray his employer, but, unfortunately he did not obey orders.

"I war ter shoot," he muttered, "ef I seen a livin' crittur; an' ef I ain't seein' one now I'm 'way off; but then a feller can't be sure, an' a orful thing it would be ter roust 'em all up fur a false 'larm. Ef I kin jist git a head on ther prowlin' skunk mebbe I kin throw him cold, w'ich'll be a blame sight better than ter shoot now an' let him git erway. It's a red, sure ez

Keristofer Kollumbus, an' he's spotted the major."

On foot, with his rifle at a ready, Sirene was watching an Indian, who in turn appeared to be keeping an eye on some one as he cautiously made his way downward assisted by a long lasso. He was half hidden among the bumps of projecting rocks, but would soon come to a level ledge, where he would be in plain view and long range.

Just when Sirene was ready events proved that he was too late. Some one or something struck him a crushing blow on the back of the head, and he fell in a heap.

The next thing he knew he was bound hand and foot, the blood on his neck was crusting, his head hurt awfully, and Captain Wilson was looking down at him, without any sign of pity in his hard-set face.

"You infernal nuisance, what are you doing here?" he asked.

"If I wasn't certain that the major would kill you for being asleep on your post I'd blow you through. How many men had he with him, and in camp; and do you think they fought or ran?"

Sirene looked at Wilson once, and was satisfied.

He didn't think anything he could say would make matters worse; and as he always looked out for number one—heretofore with pretty fair success, in spite of plenty of bad luck—he had hopes of making things better.

He answered the first question promptly; and the second after his belief.

"I reckon they *kin* fight, an' ef anybody crowded 'em they'd jest give ez good a 'count of 'emselves ez any gang ov ther same size ever got tergether, but they ain't hed no chance ter fight yet, an' you'll find 'em all bunched at ther kerrel. Major an' me war jest out, sorter scout-in' like, an' I guess he left me when you turned up."

Sirene had heard nothing of the distant rattle of firearms, which had begun and ended while he lay senseless.

"Where is this lay-out of yours, and how does the land lay around it. Talk fast, I've no time fer long yarns or big lying."

There was a pistol in the outlaw's hand that was inconveniently suggestive. Sirene briefly sketched the position of the camp.

"That's enough. You haven't been talking fer nothing, and I think you've been telling a straight story. If I come by this way again I'll let you know. So long."

"But, say! stop! hold on! Hope may die ef I ain't give it to yer straight."

Captain Wilson had already turned and was striding away. He was twenty yards distant when Sirene wailed out:

"I'm burnin' up fur drink now, an' I'll die ef yer leave me hyar."

"You bet you will!" retorted Wilson with a savage laugh, and half-turning as he spoke.

"I guess that will fix it."

His hand shot up as he spoke, he pulled the trigger; and at the report turned again and hurried on as before.

"Curses on it!" he muttered to himself, "this comes of our infernal carelessness. Raimondo's red-skins couldn't wait, and we thought we had a sure thing of it when we got the major alone. No doubt they've cleaned up the camp and gone on to some other town. We need them bad just now to head him off if he and Fresh Frank try to get out by some back door. Carjador had better have stayed with me and sent the girl back to camp with one of his men. There's never quite so big a fool as the fool that is in love. If it wasn't for old times' sake I'd kill him and get a new pard."

In spite of his unpleasant reflections the outlaw hurried on in the direction of the camp.

There had been just four in the party. One man was keeping watch and guard from a secure hiding-place at the exit from the dell, and one had returned with Raimondo who would not at present desert the senorita. They were to hasten, and send the remainder of the force to Wilson's assistance.

Meantime Wilson was after their Indian allies, with whom he had had one interview in Raimondo's presence. Although it was unknown to them, and apparently to Raleigh, there was another entrance to the Medicine Bowl—as the dell was often called among the Indians. Foxton had evidently found it, as he always found the unsuspected, and by it they would doubtless escape unless the way could be barred.

Just now Raimondo Carjador was caring for none of these things. He was selfish enough; but the feeling he had for Madelaine was something more than his selfishness, if not stronger. To win her he would sacrifice the *cache* without a murmur, and not altogether because the value of her fortune would outweigh his share of the other, two to one. If he had known beforehand that the daughter of Major Raleigh was the friend of the senorita's heart he would have thought twice before he would have entered into his alliance with the captain of the road-agents.

The courage with which Madelaine had sprung forward to the rescue of her friend's father did

not fail her when the excitement of the moment was over. She had made her bargain, and meant to hold to it so long as Raimondo did.

For a few moments they were both silent, after separating from Wilson near the spot where Old Sirene then lay senseless.

The journey before them was no pleasant one. It lay among the rocks and boulders of a network of canyons and gulches, where it was an easy thing to miss the way.

Madelaine had asked no questions and knew nothing of where this camp was located. They were to reach it as soon as possible, and after that, as she understood the contract, they were to take the back track for the hacienda. Wilson, of course, was bound to nothing; but separated from Raimondo, and with Raleigh and the rest on their guard, she hoped that he would not prove so formidable.

Their progress was slow and for a time they walked well apart. Raimondo would have looked triumphant if he had not been troubling himself what to say first; while Madelaine glanced at him from time to time, in mixed doubt and anger.

It was the woman who first found something to say.

"Raimondo, thou hast come for me with an army. If blood has not been shed it is not thy fault."

Her accents were reproachful, yet Carjador imagined he could detect something of an old-time tenderness in them. His face brightened in spite of the reproach.

"An army was needed to follow thee here. Without it at my back I should have fared ill when I met the Captain of the Black Eagles. It would not have been worth his while to be my friend instead of my foe. And though it may not seem so to thee, now, it is I that have saved thy friend and thy friend's daughter. His train, by this time, is taken; his men slain; but there is a chance for him to escape, if he now takes the back track. He is wise, never fear."

"Yet, Carjador, why hast thou been his foe? What secret reason is there? what mystery?"

"No secret, no mystery. His foe have I not been, save so far as I tried to care for my own. Years ago I found a poor dog starving, and gave him a bone. It was too late, yet he was thankful and told me something of his life, besides making me his heir."

"He was starving yet made his will. A rich legacy he had no doubt, to leave."

"He starved, yet, if his words, as he died, fell true, he was the owner of a million. He and his friend had long been prisoners among the Indians. They found great treasures among these mountains, and hid away what the dying man said was a million. He gave it all to me—his friend was slain when they attempted to make their escape—and tried to describe the place where it was buried, but death came too soon. He said something of a spot called Spirit Spring, and Medicine Bowl; but it was all vague. I came in this direction and searched a month, but all in vain."

"And Raleigh, what hath he to do with this?"

Madelaine was interested in the brief story, the truth of which she did not for a moment doubt. It explained something that she had not understood.

"In some way he hath heard the story—from an American hunter, I had in my company, most likely. Like his race he would do anything for gold. With his band he has come, to ransack the region but what he will find the lost *cache*. He would steal my gold; and I do not trust him that he would not steal thee."

"And the buried treasure that he seeks is really thine?"

"Mine by gift, and mine by deed, since it was gathered on land that was mine."

"What! here! Thine! Much good would a thousand leagues do thee here."

"I have a thousand leagues—make them but thin enough," replied Raimondo briefly.

"And a thousand warriors to the league! It would take an army a thousand strong to keep thee on thy estate for a single day."

"The grant says naught of that. And, moreover, I made the warriors my friends. Right well did I treat them, and I swore to them that but for me they would be driven from the bones of their ancestors."

"What need, then, to join hands with that villain?"

"The need that one has to take a thief to catch a thief."

He stopped right there in his story, which, garbled as it was, had much of plain truth behind it. Save that he had ever been made the heir of crazed and dying Nathan Buckthorne, he was hewing closely to the line, though he said nothing of the older grant that overlaid his own.

But a cry from Madelaine halted him, and he saw her pointing upward.

He followed the direction of her finger, while his hands dropped to his hips, and saw a revengeful face, a pair of fierce eyes glaring downward at him.

Then came the crash of a carbine, the Don's fingers loosened from the butt of the revolver they already clasped, and were clapped con-

vulsively to his breast. He reeled and fell backward, while four men came scrambling down the canyon's side.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE WAY OF A WOMAN.

It was only by chance that the senorita saw the skulkers in the first place; and by their actions recognized them as foes. When Raimondo went down, and the four raised from their semi-concealment, she knew them again at once. It was the very quartette that held her when Fresh Frank came to the rescue.

On that occasion she vowed that never again would she be taken off her guard; nor was she now. Confident through past experience that the men were about to seize her as they did before:

"Hold, there!" she exclaimed, a pistol suddenly appearing in either hand.

The challenge and the sight of the weapons was such a genuine surprise that the rush was stopped, though probably the check would have only been momentary.

But the halt was all that Madelaine asked for. She was not certain enough of her aim to risk a shot at a running man, for somehow she felt that bullets were precious.

With a stationary man the case was different. She could shoot a very good string when practicing at a mark, and a man who deserved no mercy was a great deal bigger than any mark she had ever fooled with. Without any delay the work began; and her first shot brought down human game.

Then, with a yell, Raimondo's man fell on their rear. He had been entirely overlooked as a factor in the game, and he came just when he was needed.

The leader of the four seemed to be a cool villain. He dropped back in the charge, and when Madelaine began to shoot he fell quickly to the ground.

He was not hurt, though.

It was that he might gain a fair view of the field. There seemed to be only one woman against him, but she was shooting; while so far as Raimondo was concerned his vengeance appeared to be complete. If Madelaine had been away he would have given the order to retreat. He crouched for a spring; and at the same instant was struck by some one from behind.

That left but two of the ruffians on their feet; and they were already running away.

A couple of shots only seemed to increase their speed, for the senorita cared little to harm a flying foe. It was defense alone that she had been thinking of.

The moment that it could safely be done she turned to Raimondo, who was very white and motionless, but his eyes were closed. He did not look like one dead; but like an exhausted sleeper, who might be near to death.

Madelaine bent over him with cheeks almost as white, and touched his brow lightly with her hand. It felt cold and clammy, yet she did not think it was the sign of approaching dissolution.

The story that Carjador had been telling her seemed to explain so much—she did not deem him quite so great a villain as she had done a few hours before. She began to think she rather preferred him to Mr. Foxton. There was something so lurid about the latter when he was at work.

From the Don's face she looked to his wound. There was a rent in the clothing over his breast, through which blood had been oozing, and his fingers were stained where he had clutched at his hurt; but she noted that his breath came feebly with a curious bubbling sound.

"Oh, he cannot, cannot be dead!" she exclaimed.

"No, senorita," answered a voice at her back, "but he will die. The ball is through and through his lungs."

"No, no! I will not believe it. I will nurse him myself. Come! Help me to carry him to your camp. It cannot be far."

She spoke wildly, but her words had their effect. It was no easy task that she proposed, yet enthusiasm can accomplish almost anything—if not in one way, then in another.

"It cannot be done, senorita; but wait. It will take no longer. I go to the camp and get aid. In a moment will I be back. There are sticks there, to make a litter, and men to bear it who are more able than thou. See that the villain I struck does not come to and do thee harm."

He departed at once on his mission, leaving Madelaine kneeling by the side of the Don. Now that the first shock was over she was a great deal calmer, and it struck her that perhaps there was something she could do that would be more profitable than holding his head or bemoaning his fate. With the knife that was in his belt she cut away the clothing around the wound on his breast, and plugged it with linen. Then gently turning him somewhat she found where the bullet had come out of his back, and plugged that hole also.

She worked like a beaver, and when she had drawn a bandaging scarf around his breast, and fancied that she had added at least a little to his chance for life, she began to feel surprised at her own skill and strength. She would have

forgotten all about the two of their assailants that were down, had not one of them come to his senses with a noise between a grunt and a groan.

The senorita caught up the cocked revolver that she had placed by her side when she began her surgical experiments, and wheeled, just in time.

The leader of the quartette was still weak and dazed from the blow he had received, but he was already fumbling for his missing weapons.

"Hold, sir! Attempt a movement against me and you die!"

Her order rung out, clear and strong, and had its effect. Either he recognized the courage behind it, or his own nerves gave way. He held his hands high above his head, as he staggered to his feet. Then, slowly wheeling till his back was toward the senorita, he suddenly bounded away. His companions had gone down the gulch; the direction of his flight was just the opposite. There was little danger of their meeting.

She looked back to the Don and found that his eyes had opened, and were fixed on her with a curious, yearning gaze. There seemed so much in them that she doubted almost if he had been unconscious at all. When his lips moved feebly, she bent closer.

"Madelaine," he murmured, "is it thou? I would have lost my soul for thee—to lose life seems but a little thing. But thou wilt stay by me to the end?"

"Fear not, Raimondo. I have forgotten thy threats, which were not like thee; and the force thou wouldst have used to bend me to thy will. It is a man's way to be strong when a woman is obstinate. How can I blame thee? Thy hurt is sore, but death shall not come. Thy men will be here soon to bear thee to camp. After that, rest and nursing shall save thee."

"Happy wound!"

He ceased talking, for he was weak, in pain, and tormented by a great thirst. However much he might care for Madelaine he could not forget his danger or drive away the aches and ills of his body by trying to think of her.

Fortunately they were not far from the camp, and Madelaine, who could do no more, had not long to wait. Half a dozen men came soon, and between them Raimondo was carefully borne along.

Of course the movement increased the present suffering, but what better could be done? The senorita walked by his side, sometimes holding his cold hand in hers, sometimes moistening his lips with water from the canteen which the party had brought with them. As for the corpse of the man Madelaine had shot, that was left behind, without even an examination.

To the surprise and delight of the senorita, she found that the camp was a spot almost as beautiful as the "Medicine Bowl."

It was a little glen, the lower end of which, opening out, gave a view down the mountain-side, and over a broad plain below. There was a velvety turf; green branches waved softly overhead; and water was to be had for the taking. She had not thought to find two such spots in the dreariness of the mountain range.

The wound of Raimondo was serious, but not necessarily fatal, and since the hemorrhage had not been great, the senorita had her hopes.

Hour after hour she watched, altogether forgetful of the fate of her friends, whom she had either deserted, or for whom she had sacrificed herself. Which, it would have been hard for her to tell.

At odd times she thought of the captain of the road-agents, and feared that he might come, though she hoped that Foxton and the major would fill his hands with other occupation. As she knew nothing of the undelivered order, it did not surprise her that the men all remained with her, some on guard and others waiting near, to aid Raimondo if they could.

"I die not, after all," said the Don, at last, looking up at her with a wintry smile.

"A few days of such nursing and we are in the saddle and away for home. I lose the *cache* on the Guadana purchase, but, I think, I have found something better."

It is doubtful if his repentance was very sincere, but it satisfied Madelaine while it lasted. For once he was trying to tell the truth.

CHAPTER XXVII.

DESTINY DAVE'S LAST DEAL.

MAJOR RALEIGH gave his daughter one embrace, and then wasted no more time.

Fresh Frank was standing not far off, watching the Bowl, but when the major looked about him, the sport came forward with an extended hand.

"Always around," he laughed, as he felt the clasp of the major in rather warmer shape than he had ever before known it.

"If there's a racket within a thousand miles, you notice I generally arrive—on time, and all dressed up."

"But it's getting awful monotonous, and I think if I ever get fairly out of this I'll throw away my guns, burn my decks, and go somewhere where it's all on the square, and there's no gambling. Wall street, for instance; or the

Corn Exchange. For a quiet, restful place, I always did like New York."

"You came when you were needed most; and as it has turned out, I cannot help but say I am glad to see you. And for the care you have taken of my daughter, you have my warmest thanks, though I do not understand how she happens to be here when I had hoped she was safe and well at the Banzos Hacienda."

"It grew sultry there, very sultry. They had me cooped in the cellar; and the Don made some grand threats about the senorita. Miss Raleigh had one eye for Madelaine's danger, and the other about equally interested in yours and her own. I think she might have stood Carjador, but there was the chance of the Captain of the Black Eagles appearing on the carpet and turning his attention to her. They decided to join you, and as I was then masquerading in the guise of one Tomasso, they asked me to see them through. Here we are."

"As I have already said, glad am I to see you. You seem to have found your way to this spot by some route that I have never seen, though I thought I knew the place as no other knew it. I doubt not that Raimondo and the rest are waiting for us yonder. Beyond them are two paths, but we cannot reach them. Can you find our camp through this back door of yours?"

"It's the furthest way around, but I guess it's the nearest way to get there, though perhaps you hadn't better be in too great a hurry to arrive. The massacre is about over, and if you give them time to sack the camp I think they will peacefully retire."

"Massacre? Retire? Who do you mean?"

"In the language of the border, Injuns. To judge from the way the racket died out they were getting there in fine style."

"Then we have no time to linger here. Let us go at once."

"Softly, now," answered Foxton, though leading the way. "There is a little lady to look after, who has perhaps put herself in some danger on our account. I must know where she goes to. Miss Rhoda can possibly give you some sort of an idea about the way if you cannot wait; but if you wish my valuable services you will have to tarry a bit in the first secure spot we find while I explore a little. She seemed to go very willingly, but I ought to see what she's going to."

"Very true. Yet with so much else at stake, and my daughter to see after, it is not strange that I overlooked that. We will go with you."

"Oh, no. One man is better for the work than a million, and your daughter don't want to take many extra steps. She can lead you to the spot where we camped last night, since, if you scramble up yonder gulch, you cannot miss the way. I will join you in an hour or so. If I don't find you there I can follow your trail if you don't make it too blind."

The major and his daughter went on, in the direction indicated, since Frank, without waiting for answer, turned and strode back in his quest for Madelaine.

He evaded the sentry, who had but eyes for one spot, quickened his pace to a long, tireless lope whenever the nature of the ground would permit, and got within easy pistol-shot of the Don and his companions a moment or two before the attack that struck Carjador down. If the senorita had not been in range Foxton's revolver might have taken account of the leader of the assailing party, though he was not altogether in his usual haste to chip in.

The sport was not going to be either jealous or heart-broken, but his enthusiasm was decidedly calmed as he saw the quiet, confidential way they were conversing together.

When the fight was done, and Madelaine was weeping over the wounded Raimondo, Foxton smiled grimly, and quietly stole back.

"What's the use? If the gentleman gets up, he has the inside track; and if he stays down she will never forgive me. After all, she's only a woman, and according to Mexican morals he's not the worst man in the world. The pot shouldn't call the kettle black, and Mr. Foxton counts himself out of the game. Yet, if she had given me a little more time to extend myself, I think she would at least have withdrawn her old-time objection, and admitted that I was a rustler from 'way-back. Faith! I believe it's the woman that has read me the lesson. I'll devote the balance of my time to seeing the major through."

The sport had only remained long enough to see how Madelaine was engaged, so that he missed the little flurry that followed the resuscitation of the man that had been knocked senseless. He had already got some distance away from the scene when he heard a hasty footstep in his rear.

An ejaculation of disgust at his carelessness rose to his lips, but he flung himself down at full length anyhow, facing about to the rear and hugging closely the wall of the canyon into which he had just turned.

The man who was approaching saw nothing of him until he rose again with finger on trigger.

"Hands up, colonel! I've got you again, and this time I want to put you through your paces."

What's all this murder and assassination about, anyway?"

The man halted promptly at the call, and threw up his hands; but, for the rest, made no answer. Between the senorita, the Don and the Raleighs, there had been so much English going of late that Foxton quite forgot to speak in Spanish, an oversight that he made haste to remedy.

"When a man has slain the brother and ruined one near and dear to thee, murder and assassination are but too good for him."

"And highway robbery and pillage can scarcely even the matter up! So you had a crow to pick with the Senor Carjador? Good boy! I hardly know whether to say amen or not. But you got a little more than you bargained for as it was; and if you had stood only a foot or two to the right or to the left you would have had the chance to go over the range whistling."

"But I had no thought to injure thee," hastily spoke the stranger. "I do not know thee and care not to ever see thee again. Let me go if thou dost not wish to have my blood on thy hands. They will follow me to the death."

"That's all right. That's all right. But ain't you a little off in what you say about not knowing me? This is the second time I've held the drop on you; the third time may be the charm. I see you are weaponless and alone. You may go now. I don't have a word to say about your getting even with Raimondo, whom you may shoot several more times if you care; but if I ever find you meddling again with that young lady—off goes the roof of your cabeza. Here! Turn down that way and git like lightning."

In a few words the sport had reached the bottom of this man's hate for Raimondo, and desired to know no more. Under the circumstances he would scarcely care to turn avenger, so he cast him loose to run his chances.

The Mexican went one way; Foxton another, and they never met again.

It was scarcely an hour since he had left the major and his daughter that Mr. Foxton came scrambling up the gully into which he had directed them.

The advantages for defense were admirable, and for concealment could hardly be better. If Wilson returned with a force he would scarcely think of looking so close to the spot where he had left the major; and if he found his quarry the way to dislodge it was a conundrum that would take some time to solve. The sport had seen the courage of both the major and his daughter tried. As they were armed and on the alert, a good deal of powder ought to be burned, and a good many corpses be lying around loose before the little nook at the upper end of the steep gully could be carried.

"If he only hasn't got tired waiting and pulled out!" was Foxton's thought.

"I suppose I'd have done it myself; but if he's gone further he'll be apt to fare worse. Funny he don't hold me up if he's around. Seems mighty quiet up there."

As if to contradict the thought he heard the sound of a deep groan. Springing forward over the crest of the acclivity he saw a man stretched out, hacked, bleeding and almost dead. It was Destiny Dave.

A glance around showed that Rhoda and the major were gone.

"My friend, it's nearly sunset," he said bending down over Dave, whose eyes opened and lips moved faintly.

"I wish I could do something for you but you look like a man that don't need to be told the truth. I can only moisten your lips from my canteen and wish you a safe journey over the range. I suppose you belong to the gang; did you see anything of Raleigh and his daughter? I left them here, as I thought, in safety."

"Rubbed out," whispered Dave. "Yander you kin see his blood; an' ther gal's taken. Luck's clean ag'in' us, an' Destiny Dave's froze out in ther last deal—dead!"

His eyes closed, his jaw dropped and he fell back.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

WILSON GETS ANOTHER PARD.

CAPTAIN WILSON did not linger after leaving Old Sirene. He rather expected that Raimondo would be lukewarm, now that he had recovered Madelaine, and felt as though he ought to kill him if he was. He certainly did not intend to let any bargain that had been made stand between him and his purpose. If he had known that Carjador had reached his camp, shot through and through, it would have been all the same. He would have wasted no time in nursing him.

In the race for the *cache*, since all knew about the spot aimed for, the three parties chose their own and different lines. As the major had been cramped by the need of finding a road for his conveyances he had lost the start he had and arrived a little the latest of all. Foxton had precious scant time to search for the major; and the Indians were there, or thereabouts, all the time. At least, Carjador had no trouble in finding them when he arrived, and seemed to be recognized by them as a friend.

Had they proved hostile the Mexicans and the eight men of the Black Eagles would not have been more than a mouthful for the tribe.

Nevertheless, Wilson was more than pleased at an unexpected meeting. His own men had heard the sound of firearms, and though they knew what it probably meant, they refused to stay in camp, in spite of the protest of their Mexican allies, who did not recognize any latitude in obeying orders.

The captain felt a good deal easier with seven men at his back, who could shoot as they could; and when he first saw them, had a half-formed idea of at once returning to the Medicine Bowl.

A moment's consideration, however, convinced him that he could not expect to find Raleigh there, or even the festive Mr. Foxton. If they had retreated, as no doubt they had, the least hope of getting them in hand again was to intercept their flight. If they attempted to come out through the pass by which the major and he had entered, no doubt the sentinel would give a good account of himself. If he had been aware of the fact that this sentinel had been relieved from duty by means of the lasso in the hands of the red-skin Old Sirene had scented, he would not have felt so confident of that.

"Keep your eyes open, and follow me," was his order to the men, as they joined him.

"I reckon if we strike the reds they'll play us fair, and ugly looks don't go fer much unless they really chip in. When I say so shoot for what you're worth, but don't try it on before."

With this for the order of the day he quietly but steadily advanced toward the late camp of the major.

When they were almost within view of the spot a yell announced that they had been discovered. Then a chorus of whoops told that the reds were there in force, and they caught sight of a score or more of the savages who were assembling at the cry.

Wilson halted his men, made a gesture to show that he was a friend, and then stepped fearlessly forward.

From the ranks of the savages a warrior came out to meet him, showing that he had been recognized.

"The friend of Tigertooth and of Carjador," was the captain's greeting, spoken in Spanish, which he knew the other understood.

"The scalps of the enemies of Carjador hang in the belts of Tigertooth and his warriors. What else does the white brother want?"

"The white brother is glad to see that Tigertooth has been as good as his word; but he would show him other scalps for the taking if he will find the way for him toward where they are trying to hide."

"Tigertooth knows the mountain as well as he knows his own men. Let the white brother but tell him where to look, and he will follow the trail to the end."

Partly by words and partly by signs the captain explained the situation. He had dealt with the aborigines before. He kept an eye out for treachery, and his men were close at his back.

They went through the camp of the major.

There were traces of a fight and signs of a great plunder. Several men had been slain, and the rest had vanished, with a moiety of the red-men in pursuit. The portable spoils had been appropriated, while fire was rapidly destroying the balance. The major had brought too large a party for concealment, and too small a one for an open fight. Perhaps, if he had been present to handle them, the result would have been different.

Unfortunately, after Raleigh left, the majority of the men left also, and the camp was but thinly guarded when the surprise was made.

Destiny Dave did his best, and his luck seemed to stand by him to the last. He fired a number of shots, saw the men in camp fall, and then managed to escape unfollowed and unseen, though badly wounded.

When he was fairly gone his luck ran out, since, by chance, Tigertooth led the way almost directly in his footsteps, and before long came on the drops of blood that betokened his late presence.

The direction he was blindly taking happened to be exactly that which Tigertooth wished to follow, so that his being overtaken was doubly sure.

Yet, had he been less sorely hurt, Dave might have escaped altogether, for he was shrewd and skillful in such matters, and hid his trail reasonably well. He did not see the tell-tale evidences that marked his flight, and had he done so it would hardly have been of much profit. In removing one drop of blood he would have scattered a dozen more.

On he went, turning and twisting through the narrow gulches, whose net-work was so complete that at a dozen yards he would have been totally invisible; but all the while, certain as his own fate, he was approaching the spot where the major and his daughter crouched in hiding.

He came so quietly that Raleigh, who for a moment had failed to watch the precipitous roadway while he talked earnestly with his daughter, was not aware of his nearness until he had crept into his very presence, and lay, panting with weakness and exertion, at his very feet.

"Dave!" exclaimed the major.

"You here, and badly wounded? What does

this mean? Here! let me bind up your hurts, while you tell what has happened. The camp! How are things there?"

"That Injun war right," muttered Dave.

"The bull pot are scooped, an' I'm ther only two-legged critter left runnin' on ther huff."

"But, good heavens! Was there no resistance at all? Such a force should have stood off five times their number—at least till night came."

"Ef they hed pulled tergether in the traces they c'd 'a' done it; but some sed they war goin' ter look fur sheep, an' some war squar' out an' sed they war goin' ter look fur gold. They took ther guns an' slid right out."

"I reckon they war gobbled up fu'st ov all, an' so quiet they didn't know what hurt 'em. Ef they hed jest fired a shot er gin a yell, it mout 'a' saved us. But when ther reds come inter ther lay-out they come a-bilin'. An' that settled it. I left when ther luck ran clean ther other way. What boys warn't down tuk ther back track, so I tuk t'other, an' dropped 'round hyar 'thout a soul bein' ther wiser. Thar's heaps ov rocks in ther way, but I reckon I'll make ther rifle yit."

The major anxiously watched the little gully while he listened to Destiny Dave's brief story. When it was finished he examined the wounded man.

As Dave had intimated, he was seriously but not mortally wounded if he had anything like a chance. Although the major would have vastly preferred that he should have taken his flight by some other course, he left nothing of the kind slip from his tongue, but renewed the bandages wherever needed and was glad to see that even in the short rest the man had already gathered some strength, and was beginning to examine the location to see how it was fitted for concealment or defense.

"You'll do, Dave, better than I dared hope when I first saw you. You have held on to your rifle and revolvers; between us we could make a stand here against quite a force."

"You bet I hung on. When I drops my belt you kin see daylight clean through my ribs. I kin shoot plumb center fer quite a bit, yit. In a spot like this two would be good fur a dozen. Ef thar war two dozen they might git taken in, but you kin bet they wouldn't run erway. They couldn't fur a fact."

"You are improving when you can begin to jest. No! The way in is not too easy, while the way out is more difficult still. Yet it can be used, though I hope we will not, for the present, have occasion to do so. We are here waiting for a friend—for Fresh Frank—who has gone to see what has become of that lady friend of my daughter. He brought them both here but I am afraid the senorita has fallen into bad hands since she left us of her own free will with that villainous Mexican. I dare not go far, yet I would have you be on the watch here while I look around for at least a little."

"Skip, then, pard. You kin do ez much good out ez in, an' ef I ain't wide off we can leave hyar fur good afore night."

Without waiting to give instructions, or a word of farewell to his daughter, the major hastened down the slope, and turned his footsteps directly toward the Medicine Bowl. He was not yet done with the matter of the cache.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE CAPTAIN OF THE BLACK EAGLES BEGINS TO FILL HIS HAND.

"If things at the camp are as Dave says there is no chance for the gold," muttered the major.

"And yet without gold the mine cannot be worked. It costs a fortune to bribe officials and maintain an army; to say nothing of the fact that I might have some trouble now in showing my title to the bonanza corner of the Guadara Grant."

"But there is nothing like having three strings to one's bow. There has been rank treachery or wonderful espionage; since what little I have said seems to have been known. Fortunately, on the most important point of all, I have kept silent. It is running a fearful risk, but it's a chance between losing all and getting away with a fortune. If I make the move now I dare not be captured again."

The major hastened onward, keeping a keen look out in front as well as rear. He did not know what moment the Fresh Sport might return, and his mission was one that had to be accomplished without a witness. He trusted no one now, not even Mr. Foxton. Over the semimutiny of his men, and its quick punishment, he wasted neither time nor regrets; but was forming his plans for himself and Rhoda as though the rest had never lived, and the last dozen years had not rolled away.

He halted a moment at the spot where Foxton and the young ladies had stood in ambush, and viewed carefully the dingle, and the opening beyond.

Not a living soul was in sight and the velvety carpet of grass seemed to bear no imprint made since he had left the place.

Silently he hurried down to where the broken turf showed a little darkly in the midst of the

green, and sunk down on his knees by the side of the opening.

Then he uttered a cry of rage. A single glance showed that it was not as he had left it. The opening was larger. Some one had dugged it much deeper.

"Trapped, tricked and befooled!" he cried.

"Some one else has guessed what I alone knew. There is nothing here!"

Yet he threw himself at the opening as if in the hope that he might be mistaken, and dug recklessly into the yielding earth with his bare hands, until his eye happened to light upon a second flat stone, the *fac-simile* of the one that had covered the hidden parchment. It lay by the side of the other.

At sight of that his coolness suddenly came back. He desisted from his useless labor.

"No use, no use!" he said, with a shake of his head, "and for Rhoda's sake, I must give up the search I might otherwise make. I might risk the danger to myself, but I dare not even think of allowing her to fall into the hands of these wretches who surround us. Could Foxton have suspected? Hardly, when the outlaw and his ranchero friend seemed so utterly foiled. I will go back to Dave and my daughter, and wait for the sport. He is a man of resource as well as good fortune. If he comes he may help us. If he does not there is no time lost. Our hiding-place is as secure as any that can be found, and we would not dare to attempt a move before night."

Staggering somewhat, as though he had received a blow, Raleigh made his way up from the glen, and toward the hiding-place where he had left Destiny Dave.

His late discovery had so far bewildered him that he was off of his guard. His eyes were set only upon the route he was taking, and even that he followed mechanically.

Then there was a low hurling in the air, but he scarcely could have heard it, as he sunk down just when he had turned to leave the bed of the canyon and ascend the gully, while the feathered shaft of an arrow showed how he had been stricken from afar.

As he settled to the ground he uttered a single, low moan, and the sound was echoed by the crack of a rifle from somewhere near, followed by pistol-shots, wild yells and a woman's scream in the little nook where the Raleighs had sought concealment. The spot had been found, and again there was wild work among the mountains.

The cry from Rhoda was not forced from her through any danger of her own, but because, looking downward in anticipation of her father's coming, she had seen him fall.

The sight froze her blood; the silence of the stroke made it all the more terrible. When the rifle cracked it seemed possible that his life had not been taken. Before she could clear her eyes of the mist that had come over them there was a danger to herself and Destiny Dave, and it was near at hand.

The way of retreat, were they attacked from in front, had seemed difficult enough. Now, its steepness was no bar to an attack from that direction. She did not see who fired them, but half a dozen shots in quick succession came crashing down into the niche, from above, until Destiny Dave lay at her feet.

While she stared wildly around the Captain of the Black Eagles sprung to her side, flung his arm around her waist, and lifting her from her feet bore her bodily away down the precipitous path, and then along the canyon, toward the Medicine Bowl.

She was half-senseless, though she knew vaguely that the revolver once in her hand had been knocked from her grasp, and she afterward was conscious of having cast what she feared was a last glance at where her father lay.

She failed to see him, though why she could not guess. Of only one thing was she certain. She was a captive in the hands of Captain Wilson, while at his back were his outlaws.

Both Foxton and the major had been mistaken as to the lay of the land beyond the nook. The spot was more easily found from the side Wilson entered it than the other. Tigertooth would probably have come with him had he and his men not been led away in pursuit of one of the deserters from the expedition. One of his flankers caught a glimpse of the major and dropped him on sight to fall an instant later before a ball through his brain.

The fugitive white man was given credit for the work, and the pursuit streamed away more eager than ever. So it happened that Destiny Dave saved his scalp; and Wilson was able to carry away his captive without discussing with Tigertooth the question to whom she belonged.

"I've got you, my daisy, and if I can I'll keep you. The old gentleman appears to have as many lives as a cat. When the frolic is over I've no doubt that he will come up all fresh and smiling. About that time the bargaining will begin. There's wealth somewhere about, and I expect to get a great big slice of it before I finish. Perhaps I had better put you in a place of safety before I begin scouting for the old man."

He looked sharply at Rhoda. She might be able to give him some information as to the

whereabouts of her father and Frank Foxton, for he had well assured himself that neither were hidden in the niche.

Almost at the side of the little excavation he set her down, though his hand still gripped her shoulder.

"Now a word, my gentle damsel. Heretofore I've been just as soft as silk, but when I talk to you I calculate on your saying something as long as you're able. Just gather your wits together. You see this revolver. It's resting right against your regal head. Where is your father?"

"Dead!" answered Rhoda, in a despairing, husky whisper.

CHAPTER XXX.

FOXTON FINDS MORE FUN.

THERE was not the least doubt in the mind of the outlaw that Rhoda spoke the truth as she knew it. Her look, her tone convinced him of that, and for the moment he was staggered.

The mine, if such existed, might be found; but in that his interest was not so immediate. He had been rather lukewarm about that, except as part of the machinery to wring handsome wages from his Mexican confederate.

But a *cache* of undetermined though great value was something else. From the time that he knew of it—and Raimondo concealed the knowledge as long as he could—his enthusiasm rose. There was a great difference between working a bonanza, and suddenly falling heir to what the bonanza had produced.

So, the further he went along the more interested he became, until he was willing, at every hazard, to take up the work where Raimondo left off. At first Cajador's aim had been to keep the major away from the mine which he hoped some day to find himself; but later on the object was to wring or wrest the secret from him.

If Raleigh was dead, was his secret also dead, forever?

Wilson asked himself the question, and as he did so his eyes by chance fell upon the hole that he himself had dug at the spot where they had captured the major.

There could not be a question but that it was larger than when he had left it.

In the loose ground by its side he saw the print of a foot. Was it the major's? Had he returned to the spot and unearthed the treasure?

And where was Frank Foxton—where the corpse of Edward Raleigh?

He asked the questions of Rhoda but her answer was a burst of tears. Even a woman with such courage as she could be broken down—not by fear but by grief.

"I believe on my soul the *are* both dead," murmured the captain.

"Foxton may not care for the girl but she cares for him; that is certain. With father and lover gone over the divide it's no wonder if she is all broke up. If she knows anything she will say it now. With all the world lost, what does a woman care for a secret?"

"Yet, who killed them? Where are the bodies? Tigertooth has missed them, and Raimondo, the pitiful fool, is thinking of nothing but the black-eyed witch who is playing him fast and loose. I verily believe they are bad enough to desert her if they thought by so doing they could throw dust in my eyes and escape with a fortune. Raleigh deserted her once before and she came to no harm; he may think it safe to try the same game again. If you do, Major Raleigh, you will find that the chief of the Black Eagles is after wealth, and does not care much how he gets it! If he is living, and has tried to play such a game I'll show him! He cannot well get away from me if Tigertooth keeps faith. If he does break through I'll wager he bears some other time what has become of his daughter."

He ground out the threats savagely and aloud, and he put so much of his own cruel self into them that Rhoda shuddered in spite of her anguish.

She knew the foulness of the slander on her father's memory; and there was something terrible in the idea of taking vengeance on a corpse. She turned somewhat and faced Wilson, her cheeks flushed, her eyes somewhat reddened by the late burst of tears, but her whole frame quivering with indignation.

"I am alone in the world, sir. Lover I have had none, and not five minutes ago I saw my father fall a corpse. Of my father's affairs I know nothing save that he visited this region to search for a mine of which he once knew."

"Of the affairs of Mr. Foxton I know still less, save that he was an old-time admirer of the Senorita Banzas, and, I think, was in search of her. Perhaps he has followed her; more likely he is dead. You have nothing to gain from me; why should you talk of vengeance, or burden yourself with a woman? Take me, or direct me to Madeline, and you will have my thanks. She may perhaps have influence enough with the Don to have him recover the body of my father and bury it decently, and protect me back to the hacienda. I make no threats since I see little chance to carry them

out; but my thanks may profit you more than my hate."

"Humph! If it's only a funeral you want I might gratify you myself. Where is the body of your father? From the way you talk it cannot be far away, and I'm willing to lose a little time to show myself a Christian gentleman."

"You could hardly have failed to see it since he fell just when he was turning from the canyon toward the spot where you captured me. It was an arrow that slew him."

"I'll look into it, and if there's any truth in the story I'll set it down to your credit. Here, Jackson, I'll go back and see; you keep an eye on the lady. If she gets away—you know me."

The captain thought well enough of the story to investigate; when he reached the place, though no corpse was there, there were traces and stains, showing where someone had weltered in his blood.

How had the body disappeared? There was very little to show, yet the faint indications he thought he could detect seemed to point toward the Medicine Bowl. Perhaps the body had been carried that way by the Fresh Sport.

He came back to where Rhoda stood, tremblingly awaiting the result.

"I guess you were trying to tell the truth," was his ambiguous greeting.

"You needn't worry about the body any longer—if you went back now you would find that it was no longer there."

"You have hidden it then. Where? One day I may want to stand by the side of his bones."

"Scarcely. I think that just now the less information you have the more manageable a piece of calico I will have in my hands. Come along. You talked a little too much when you unfolded your plan to secure Raimondo's protection. I don't trust him, anyhow, and will hunt up a new camp. I'll provide for your safety first, and then take a close look around in this quarter. I've not lost all hope of the *cache* yet; and, anyhow, I've got *you*. Tigertooth may have secrets to sell, and a handsome young American squaw ought to have a big market value."

Hardly as much threat as reflection were the man's last words, but they were all the more terrible; and they brought Rhoda back to herself more than anything else he could have said. She could forget her father and Frank Foxton in the face of such a danger as that. She went with the outlaw, and her manner seemed as unresisting and dazed as ever; but now she was only biding her time.

If Wilson had been a little less hurried in his movements, or had not decided to keep his prisoner out of Raimondo's sight, he would have stood a fair chance of hearing from Frank Foxton. It was not more than five minutes later that the sport was bending over Destiny Dave, receiving from him the little information he had breath left to utter.

It was very meager indeed, but it was enough to start Foxton on the war-path.

"It's a pity for the poor fellow," was his thought, "but there's nothing I can do for him now, and there are duties to the living. Confound this Wilson! I suppose I will have to be under the necessity of killing him yet, and then the fun will all be stopped. When I meet a man that gives me such a healthy old racket as this has been, staying by me to the last gasp, I begin to think too much of him to turn his toes up to the daisies. He never knows then, how bad I've beat him. But I've been too everlasting careless, and that's a fact. I must be lame, blind, deaf, and an infernal fool besides, not to have caught on to what's been transpiring until yonder poor fellow told me. If they haven't taken me in and dressed me down it's not my fault."

As jauntily as ever ran his thoughts, yet Mr. Foxton was turning his attention to very serious things. He did not understand how a struggle could have occurred there without his having heard a breath of it, but the fact was, while the little shooting was going on here, he had been watching Madeline, and he heard only the nearest revolvers. The rocky floor of the canyon would show no traces of the footsteps that had pressed it while he was absent, but it was strange that he should have passed unobserved through the dingle, or that he did not notice the splash of blood where the major fell.

It was time to make up for all that now by extra diligent work.

He laid Destiny Dave quietly in the most shaded part of the nook, and, after one more glance around in search of anything that might tell him a story, began cautiously to descend the gully.

Luckily for him his senses were once more on the alert. He had not made a dozen steps when he halted and crouched; then began slowly to retrace his way. Some one was coming down the canyon, and the chances were all that it was an enemy.

Before he had quite reached cover his rifle went up for he had a fair opportunity to bring down the intruder. Had it been Wilson he would scarcely have hesitated, whatever the danger; but it happened that this was one of

Tigertooth's braves, and there were a dozen more close behind him, though as yet out of sight. With a bare hope that he might retire unseen, Frank held his hand and turned into the niche just as a loud yell announced that his presence was discovered.

"Once more the fun begins," muttered Foxton. "There's a dozen below, and by heavens! there's an army coming down on me from above."

CHAPTER XXXI.

RATS IN A BOX.

"If I could just shunt around one of my two eyes into the back of my head how convenient it occasionally would be. Unfortunately I can't, and so I'll have to take them as they come. Meantime they won't be getting very much of the dead medicine on yours truly."

The case was desperate enough in all conscience, for if the gang had succeeded in cleaning out the whole of Major Raleigh's party what chance would one man have against them?

That was the way it looked; but that was not the way that Foxton felt. He had been in a good many remarkably tight places during his eventful life, and, though compelled sometimes to temporarily sit under a cloud, he had so regularly come out in the end with flying colors that he had become a rank fatalist, having thorough confidence in his charmed luck. Besides that, he knew that his nerves never went back on him, and that of all the crack shots he had met, not one of them could shoot a more perfect string.

He was rather glad that he had been seen, since no doubt an attempt would have been made to search the spot, and he did not care about having to begin operations by firing on an unsuspecting foe. When he heard a hail in broken Spanish, and a summons to surrender, it was no more than he had expected.

As there was no answer to the summons it was repeated, this time by the chief himself. The scramble around through the canyons had made him keen for blood, but had not caused him to forget his caution.

"Hello yourselves, down there!" was this time the sport's response; spoken in straight English, too.

"What do you fellows want? I'm the most peaceable child you ever saw if you'll only give me plenty of room; but I can't stand crowding. I'll plug the first man, and every other man, that tries to mount those stairs."

Of course he kept himself concealed from those both above and below. While he could not expect to refrain from exposing himself somewhat in one direction or the other, after the ball fairly opened, he was not throwing away any chances until it was necessary. Had Rhoda and Destiny Dave been as careful they might have been with him yet.

Somewhat to his surprise Foxton heard old Tigertooth reply in the same language:

"White man shoot, white man burn a heap. Tigertooth got all scalp him want but must hap white brave out. Give gun, give heap-shoot pistol, then white man kin git, so him never come back."

"Oh, that's entirely too thin. It won't wash anyhow. When you get my guns you'll get me and what you get will be for keeps. I'll just hold the fort up here and you can go on with your rat-catching down there. Sorry if I intrude, but crowd me and I'll make you just too sick. Last warning, and if you don't take it the fun begins."

The Indians understood enough of this to make out that it was both a defiance and a warning; yet it seemed foily to think that one man would attempt to hold out against them all after they had offered him terms. They were so flushed with success that they would have charged right up in the first place had not Tigertooth restrained them. So far he had lost but one brave and the thought struck him that although he had hitherto believed otherwise, this was the man who had fired the fatal shot.

Foxton's defiance was a good deal like a red rag flaunted before a bull. If the old chief did not lose his head the rest did, especially when their howl was answered by the same kind of a yell from somewhere way above. Without hesitation they began a charge upward.

At the same time Mr. Foxton began to shoot.

Luckily for him he could give an almost undivided attention to what was coming up, since the red-skins above had not yet begun to scramble down in force.

Once, twice, his revolver cracked, each time the bullet going where he thought it would do the most good.

Then he turned his head quickly, threw up his hand, and took a snap-shot that counted just as usual. His head alone had been visible, and yet, from somewhere above, there had dropped an arrow that barely grazed him.

The fellow that fired it had crawled down some little distance, and was hanging over a projecting rock. With Foxton's bullet in his brains he let go his hold, and at once began rushing downward.

The sport knew what was coming, but did not turn his head until the body lodged just a few

feet from him, and he had fired another shot. Then he caught up the corpse and sent it whirling down the acclivity, full in the face of the advancing braves.

As it first broke from cover there was a yell of joy, for they had an idea that some lucky shot had brought down their foe. The advance slackened.

But when Mr. Foxton opened out with both hands, and a yell that seemed as loud as their own and about twice as wicked, there was something like a panic. They wheeled and went tumbling down a great deal faster than they had tried to come up. There was stumbling and struggling, and men going heels over head, while the rearmost Indian, recognizing the fact that he was in a pretty tight place, caught up the body that had come from above, and slinging it over his back made the descent with the legs flopping about him.

The sport took the opportunity to recharge his revolvers. He had no idea of being able to kill them all, but he wanted to read a wholesome lesson and reduce the situation, as soon as possible, to a state of siege. While he could not shoot as effectively in the darkness, his only chance, as far as he could see, was in getting away under its cover. If he could stand them off until night came he had some hope of getting out of this place, which was just as good a trap as it was a fort.

While he was watching the retreat he unconsciously was exposing his rear. Zip! went an arrow, just over his shoulder.

Then, so close that the sudden report caused him to drop at full length, with revolvers thrust out in anticipation of a hand-to-hand struggle, there cracked a rifle.

He would not have been more surprised if Tigertooth and half a dozen warriors had gained the nook and were ready to fling themselves on his shoulders.

Destiny Dave was sitting up, braced against a rock, his jut discharged Winchester between his knees, looking almost as much as ever like a dead man, yet with strength enough to be dangerous. He had caught on to the attack from above and had protected Frank Foxton's rear, just in time.

"Hello! Luck has turned, and the tide begins to run the other way! What's the matter with you?"

There was a lull in the battle, and the sport had time to ask questions.

"I ain't much breath left ter spare, but I sh'd jedge I'm comin' round ef ther heavy work don't flatten me out ag'in. You keep 'em straight down thar an' I'll hold 'em level up above, ez long ez I last."

Dave's voice was very husky, but, as Foxton thought to himself, it beat that of any ghost ever invented. Still, there was no time to discuss the miraculous revival until it was settled what the reds intended to do. Frank turned again, to guard the path below, while Dave kept his eyes firmly fixed upward.

They watched this way, in silence, for some time, but there was no movement from either end of the line. The Indians had evidently received a lesson; the question now was, what they were going to learn from it.

"They're holding a pow-wow," said Foxton, at length, casting an eye on Dave, and noticing that his strangely-recovered strength had given no sign of failure, but that, if anything, he was in better shape than the last time he had seen him.

"Bet your life that there's not more than a couple at one end or the other. If we knew which, it wouldn't be a bad time to break. We could mop the rocks up with half a dozen and be away before the rest got 'round to us."

"Pard, I ain't makin' ez many breaks ez I used ter was; but ef you think you kin git thar don't wait on me. All thet's left fur Destiny Dave are to bite ez deep ez he knows how, an' when he's made his last scratch, git outen ther damp."

"Sure enough, old man. I wasn't thinking. We'll stay here together till night, and then we'll do the best we know how."

"Jest ez you say. I ain't got no claim ter talk, when it's dog-gone doubtful ef I kin work my own passage. But I'm thinkin' they'll find some way ter smoke us out afore night."

As if to prove the truth of the suggestion there was a loud crash, and a boulder of nearly half a ton in weight came rolling down.

Then came another and another. The reds worked in perfect silence, and with a regularity that indicated they intended to keep it up.

"If the supply of dornocks holds out, and they take their time, I should judge they can fill the gulch," suggested Foxton, as a fourth boulder flew past.

"Of course if we get in the way that's our risk, and what they're praying for. It's pretty sure, though, that they can't come up or down while this thing is going on, and as long as the rock whoop on through, they might amuse themselves a heap sight worse. Say not, pard?"

"Thar's heaps of stone up thar," answered Dave, "an' ther copper-skinned skunks are in dead airnest. It's a mighty slow game, but in ther end it's bound ter win."

"Well, if they get the run of the cushions, and put on enough English, I should judge it would."

Foxton skipped around quite lively before he spoke. One of the rocks had thundered into the nook, struck the wall, and in the resulting carom had nearly made an end to the Fresh Sport.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE RATS BEGIN TO GNAW.

"THEY'VE got us hyar, like rats in a hole," groaned Destiny Dave.

"They're gwine ter rub us out without givin' us ther fu'st show fur our white alley. You bit 'em too hard in ther fu'st fly, pard, an' hyar we be. We won't see another red tell we pass over. I'm a dyin' cripple, but I can't stand this. Next time a rock goes by I'm goin' ter foller, an' have jest one more whack at 'em down berlow."

"Oh, no," retorted Foxton. "You can't afford it. I never yet lost my sand till I was dead burst, and we're not that by a long sight. I'm saving a stake for the darkness; and that will be along soon. Watch out, now, and I'll help you to dodge. Maybe if we keep very quiet they'll stick their heads in the hole to see if they're dead yet; and then the rats won't bite fast and hard? Of course not."

It was a trying situation without question. No wonder was it that Dave's nerves had given 'way, and that he talked wildly. Foxton knew that he meant what he said and exerted himself to calm him, while crouching to prevent, if need be, a rash charge.

"I'm a dyin' man," continued Dave, speaking to himself, "an' I'm burnin' up with thirst. I'd like ter save my top-knot, but I can't hold on no longer. Suthin's got ter be did, an' ther sooner I pass in my chips ther better I'll like it."

Water was a scarce article up there among the rocks, and so was brandy, but the sport had a little of each that he was husbanding carefully. He had forgotten the fever of Destiny Dave's wounds, and in fact had not time to examine them since the first cursory glance, when he thought the borderman was dying. The only medicine he had found opportunity so far to administer was the medicine of his tongue, and that did not seem to have altogether reached the right spot.

"Now, see here, Dave," the sport said, suddenly and sharply, "I'm bossing this outfit, and I'm not going to have any nonsense. There's a little water in the canteen, and I'll wet your lips now and then—I wish I could let you drain it, but I daren't. We may need it more when we open real business by and by. Then I'll look you over. I guess the holes have all stopped themselves up pretty much, but I'll try and fix them so they won't open. After that I don't want to hear any more fol-de-rol. When I say move you'll move; and not a mite sooner, if I have to lay you out, cold as a wedge. You sabbe?"

It was about the only way to talk to the despairing man. If he had been in his ordinary strength when Foxton began that way, he would have begun to fight. Now, he took a sudden turn, nodded, and whispered:

"All right. You're a good little man, if you are mighty fresh. Boss ther lay-out and I'll do ther chores."

Several more rocks had rumbled by while they were talking. Frank had become accustomed to them, and by a little prospecting had decided that at this rate it would be some time after sundown before they would begin to lodge in their place of refuge. He drew Dave into the safest corner, gave him a few sips of water, and examined his hurts, doing what little he could for the newer ones.

"What do you make of 'em, pard?" anxiously asked Dave.

"It ain't about gittin' well I'm talkin' ov; but kin I travel when you're ready ter skip?"

"I'm not fooling you, Dave. I couldn't stand up under them; but I reckon you can carry them if you try right hard. Anyhow, I'm not leaving you till you get ready to go. That's Frank Foxton, all over and every time. Keep the upper lip stiff, and I'll lay odds you'll do. If you can't, you want to shuck yourself of that name, and get one with a little more milk and water in it. Where's your destiny if it won't take you out of a little hobble like this?"

"Kerrect ag'in. It ain't often yer finds me off my base; but yer see, pard, I'm stiff, dead, an' laid out, a man's sorter infant-like when he comes ter life ag'in. Takes him a bit ter stiffen up an' learn ter walk. But I'm thar now, an' a new man."

Perhaps it was sheer will-power, but more likely he was recovering from the shock of his wounds, and his magnificent constitution was having a chance to assert itself. He caught up his rifle, that he had allowed to rest by his side since there seemed to be no use for it, and scanned narrowly the roadway.

In the nook where they lay the shadows of evening were already beginning to fall, though they could still see the glow of sunshine on the rocks beyond.

"Reckon it's jest about ez good ter cripple ez

ter kill, an' I'll feel a heap better ef I'm doin' suthin'."

"Take care you don't get mashed while you're trying it, then," the sport cautioned; but Dave had already fired and fallen back, while a howl from above told that one of the human catapults had incautiously exposed himself, and Dave's shot had struck home. The rock that he was helping to move did not pass through on time.

There was so long an interval that Dave began to feel some concern.

"Mebbe I hedn't orter done it, pard. They may take another plan that'll work a heap better. Ef they hed dropped all them bowlders plump down from overhead—waal, we wouldn't never be needin' no tombstones now."

"They can't get there, which is the cheerfullest feature in the whole programme. That is, they can't get any rocks there; and from what I noticed of the lay of the land, I should say it was a mighty uncomfortable place to take a promenade, anyway. I never saw the sense of an earthquake before, but I begin to think there's nothing thrown away. That's what helps us out just now."

"It'll jest about take another one ter finish ther job. Will yer go up er down when yer makes that break, after dark?"

"Bless your soul, my dear old fellow, if I'm half as bad as my reputation I guess I'll do both. You seem strong enough to stand it now, so I'll give it as my honest opinion that a cat couldn't get out of either end of this sluice now, or any other time, until they believe we are dead. The noble aborigines have come in force and come to stay, while it strikes me I have latterly seen some of the Black Eagles cavorting around near headwater."

"But ef thar's no hope what's ther use ter fool erway time? Mou't ez well go down an' git shot, ter end it."

Dave spoke gloomily again, for Foxton's opinions sounded more than discouraging. The latter laughed carelessly.

"Oh, I'm holding the break for fun. Something will come along by and by—it's bound to come. You go in fer fate; but I'm clean gone on luck. It's the daisy that sees us through as long as it lasts; and when it goes for good one might as well die, anyhow."

"Fur we've got to, sure."

Dave threw in his words by way of brief answer, and then was silent. If Foxton had no plan it was time for him to be thinking about one. Moreover, it suited him better to think than talk, especially if there was nothing more encouraging to be said.

As night dropped down more darkly Tigertooth showed that he was awake, and waiting. Even in the blackness of the night he did not care to risk an attack while the Fresh Sport who had taught him such a lesson, was on the alert, while the glare of a fire at either end showed that Foxton was not to have the chance to slink out unperceived.

All the time the bombardment continued.

"It's no use, Dave. I've settled myself to a losing game," said Foxton, at length.

"We can't get out unless we can fly away."

"Hist!" was the answer, and Dave touched his hand in the darkness.

"They've got the dead medicine on us this time. They're comin' straight down from erbove. I hear the rope a-danglin'."

"That's queer, mighty queer."

Foxton heard the sound also, and spoke reflectively.

"There's never a red in that outfit has the nerve to come down that way with me waiting for him here. Just hold on till some one loans you a quarter. There's more in the cellar than rats."

The rope hung out in the direct line of the gully-way. It was somewhat dangerous to attempt to reach it; but Foxton did, drawing it toward them in time to escape a boulder that just then went thundering by.

On the end of the cord was tied a large stone, evidently intended to force it down over the uneven edges of the fissure above.

"Softly whisper hallelujah, Dave! The impossible has happened. We've found a friend with nerve and brains. He's twitching on the string now, to tell me to come up."

"Twitch on the string, then, an' tell him ter come down till we see what he looks like. I'll bet er mustang an' saddle ag'in a ring-tail racoon thet ther color ov his kin's red."

"Done! Book it, please. But I'm going up; when we let the rope down tie it under your arms and we'll do the best we can. Here goes!"

He made a dash and was up the cord, half-a-dozen feet, and out of danger, in an instant. Then he progressed more slowly until after no little labor, he drew himself cautiously out of the fissure.

"All right, pard," whispered a voice. "I tho't I'd bit yer 'bout where you lived. It's been a dre'ful long day, but I can't say but what I've enjoyed it. I wouldn't chip afore sundown 'case I'm hired by ther month an' nothin' throwed in fur extry hours. But I'm hyar now, an' yer mule's in ther gulch; ain't it time ter travel?"

Bob Jones and his shot-gun were on hand.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

A NEW WAY TO GET BEARINGS.

"You couldn't have done a neater thing if you had tried a year," whispered Foxton, grasping Jones's hand with enthusiasm.

"You do exactly beat the Jews. You needn't say a word till we get somewhere. I understand the whole game. But I've got a friend down there that has been badly broke up. We'll have to take a pull on him before we can be ready to move."

"Fish him out! That's a heap sight ov runnin' ter be did afore mornin', an' I ain't jest so sure we kin git out ov hyar. When they begin to miss them gerloots they may hit ther trail ov yours ter command. Blame ther dif', though! I'm hired by ther month, an' I'll do my dooty."

He jerked his thumb over his shoulder toward a couple of dark forms that lay suggestively silent; and meantime Mr. Foxton lowered the rope.

When they knew that the cord was around Destiny Dave they hauled him up as carefully as they could, and, for a badly wounded man that didn't say much. The man of destiny was really in better shape when he appeared than Foxton had hoped for.

"And now, see here, Robert, I'll give you the lay-out as it is in short meter, and you talk accordingly. I guess I needn't tell you that the major's party have been taken in, and those who haven't had their hair cut for nothing have been badly scattered. I brought the girls through safe, and the senorita is provided for; but where in blazes are Raleigh and his daughter? I've got to know before I look for a back track; can you give me a hint?"

"Ain't seen nothin' ov ther boss, an' I guess he's went under; but I passed Rhoda ez I kin along. Might ov chipped but it war too airy in ther evenin'. I ain't on dooty till after sundown, an' nobody hez sed turkey wunst when they're talkin' about extry hours an' work w'ot ain't down on ther small bills—I'll p'int out ther spot—it's whar our mut'l, John Wilson, ther missyunary, are camped. Ef you feel like shakin' his hand I'll hold a club ready. Warm gratty-tood are 'bout all he's fit fur. By ther way, ez I come erlong I also seen a cuss they call Old Sirene. He war tied in a double bowknot an' a kink in each leg. I straightened him up an' turned him loose, givin' him a p'inter er two. Mebbe he'll give an ercount ov hisself ez he goes erlong. Ther blamed old Jonab! I don't want him in our outfit, not fur nobody an' nothin'."

The latter part of this was spoken in a low tone as they scrambled down the "hog-back" by which Jones had reached the fissure. Previous to starting, and in order to give Tigertooth something to think about, as he afterward explained, he had dropped a couple of bodies into the narrow chasm. As the corpses belonged to him Mr. Foxton had no pretext to object, and just now he would not, for the world, have had a serious difference of opinion with the irrepressible Robert.

Leaving the siege still in progress, and with a hope that nothing would break it up before they were well out of the mountains the three hurried on without mishap for some time, until they were once more gliding through the crevices and canyons that they had attributed largely to earthquakes.

"And now, boss, I won't deny that you know 'most as much about the lay of things as I do. Ef it were daylight I mou't hev an idear whar we stand, but ez she are I kin only gamble a leetle, an' swear if I don't win. It's rough ter be draggin' this wounded pard ov yourn 'round but ef he wonst drops out of ther percesh I'll never tell yer whar he left, an' it's odds ef he turns up ag'in till the last horn blows."

"I kin walk tell I drop," was Destiny Dave's answer, more like himself than ever.

"After that, don't you bother. Maybe my checks 'll all be counted an' I'll git ther right change back, an' mebbe I'll jest be waitin' fur ther keards ter be shuffled fur a new deal. It ain't Dave that's playin' this game, anyhow. It's jest fate."

"Come, Dave, that's good enough when the cards are running your way, but I notice when you get in a bad hole—well, I won't cast it up to you. If one gets out of this mess, the others won't be far off, and that settles it. But all the same, I'm not going back on a woman. I've put that up as my platform several times, and all the time. The next thing in order is for Robert to find where he saw the major's daughter. If he don't just remember the spot he can make a healthy old hunt for it, though we can't do much in that line before the moon rises."

Foxton was asking impossibilities when he suggested Jones leading them to Wilson's camp, while Robert's talk, in view of the actual facts, was the biggest kind of braggadocio.

To an ordinary mortal their progress so far would have seemed nothing short of a miracle. Down in the gulches the darkness was almost thick enough to feel, and, as the way was none too even, the wonder was that no one had broken his neck. An ordinary man would have seated himself then and there, and considered that he couldn't move a foot.

Still, as the reader knows, Foxton was not an ordinary man, Jones had given some startling

evidences of ability, while Dave, had he not been so severely wounded, would have been able to hold his own in almost any company.

Therefore they did not sit down, but went slowly on, Jones leading the way as he guessed at it, until he suddenly gave a low, warning hiss and stood stock still.

It was just as well that they were proceeding quietly, and that conversation, always carried on under breath, had latterly languished, else they would scarcely have heard the tread of moccasined feet that now fell faintly on their ears.

They waited in silence until the sound had entirely died away. Then Foxton whispered:

"It's a red, and he's going somewhere—where, we'll follow and see."

There could be no question about the direction in which they had heard the sound, since it was right before them in the gulch. How long they could follow it would depend on whether it kept straight ahead or turned off in one of the side fissures that here and there led away. There was also the chance of its leading them into an ambush; but that didn't count. They had left the nook in the rocks and its besiegers at least a mile behind them, and hoped that they would have no more to do with Tigertooth and his army.

Jones was still in the advance, though they kept so close together that they could almost touch elbows.

The noise of the footsteps was not heard again, and they followed the trend of the gulch for what seemed to be a long while.

And then there was the sound of a heavy blow, followed on the stroke by a grunt from the man with a gun, who appeared to rise in the air, and fall back so heavily that he sent the others staggering as he struck them on his way to the ground.

Foxton made no effort to withstand the shock, but threw himself down as lightly as he could, his revolver advanced, ready for an attack. He could see nothing at which to shoot, and he never fired at random. He didn't know whether he was pleased or raving when he heard Jones, in spite of the position, swear savagely.

"You infernal idiot, do you want to get our scalps taken? Put a button on till you're cool enough to tell us what's the matter."

"You're the boss, blame yer!" retorted Robert, viciously, "an' I'm hired by the month an' pay in advance; but dog-gone my draggle-down tail-feathers ef I let myself out to be kicked ter death by your infernal, hip-shot, gotch-eared, mangy-tailed dromedary. It's yer mule, cuss ye, it's yer mule!"

Rhadamanthus was around, and, as usual, had got his work in with both feet.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

SHE MUST DIE.

BELIEVING that her father was dead; his men dispersed or slain; her friend, the senorita, false; and the majority of mankind her foes; Rhoda Raleigh had not been caring much whether she lived or died. If there was any preference at all it was for the latter.

As she could do nothing else she went unresistingly with the Captain of the Black Eagles. When the time came she had decided to make a desperate effort to escape, and be killed in the attempt.

After what Wilson said she recognized her folly in mentioning Raimondo's name, though at the time she had not known that he and the chief of the outlaws were camped together. Even if Madelaine was a prisoner like herself it would have been a comfort to be near her.

The chances were that the senorita was more than a prisoner. Rhoda was a woman herself, and knew the power of the sisters of her sex when they once found the proper chords to touch.

There was no trouble about Wilson's finding a spot suited to his purpose. A temporary retreat was what he wanted, until he could confer with Tigertooth, and see what Raimondo intended to do. As he did not care to trust the chief too far he intended that it should be a strong position, kept well guarded. He had seen the very place.

It would not be so easy to look after the horses if the Don was inclined to dissolve the partnership and claimed the present camp for himself; but that, too, could be arranged.

Rhoda scarcely looked around her when the captain declared that their journey, for the present, was ended. The comfort was colder than even that of the preceding night, and beyond that she hardly cared to see.

They turned into a gully, very much like that by which she and her father had sought refuge at parting with Frank Foxton, and like it one man could hold the way against a score. Afterward the path changed into a narrow ledge, still tending upward until it ended on a rocky floor, that was overhung by a huge mass of rock, jutting out from the table-land above. It was, in fact, a large room, with two sides, a ceiling and a floor, all of solid stone.

"I did not anticipate opening so early for the season, and our uphol-terers have not yet finished their work," said Wilson, with a wave of his hand toward the naked rock.

"The furniture is on the way from Paris, however. Until it comes I guess we can make shift to get along some way or other. Rest as comfortably as you can, my child. If you have any habits of walking in your sleep, talking in your dreams, or the like, I should advise you to get rid of them before you retire. My boys have an uncomfortable practice of shooting in the direction of any noise they do not understand; while, if you took a promenade in yonder direction, you would be apt to have an opportunity to try your wings. It's a hundred feet down, and jagged stone at the bottom. Here's a canteen of water, and the guards will have supper in due time, when you can join them. I have business with Tigertooth and Raimondo, but I won't be gone long."

Leaving three men to look after his prisoner Wilson departed on his expedition.

The location of the Medicine Bowl was firmly fixed in his mind, and he expected to find the Indians somewhere near it.

He was not mistaken. If he had not known the way the sounds of battle would have guided him in the right direction. He came up shortly after Frank Foxton had succeeded in repelling the attack.

It was not a good time to ask for a conference then. If he had known how things were going he would have given Tigertooth a wide berth. Impudence and nerve carried him through. He went safely away with an appointment for Tigertooth to meet him at his camp, just as soon as the business in hand was satisfactorily adjusted. Then he went on to seek Carjador, and look after his horses.

He found Raimondo doing as well as could be expected, Madelaine silently watching the wounded man, and Carjador's followers as steadily watching the outlaw. While he remained in camp their eyes were never off of him, and they looked as though they intended to shoot on the smallest provocation.

Wilson had suspected something, or he would hardly have troubled himself to hunt up Raimondo. It was a surprise to find him badly wounded, after being prepared to learn that he and the senorita were already on the way to the hacienda.

The sight of him brought to Madelaine's mind the memory of her friends.

Here and now she did not fear the captain of the Black Eagles. It was in a tone of something like command that she asked after the major and his daughter.

The captain laughed lightly and shook his head.

"I only wish I knew. I thought perhaps they had taken refuge here, and came to inquire. This poor fool seems to have got himself counted out of the game, and to find the Raleighs appears to be about my only plan to make a stake. When I catch on, I'll let you know."

"But surely you have seen some signs. You must know if they are living or dead—whether they are bidden among the hills or have made their escape toward the plain?"

"The best authentic report makes the major dead and his daughter in the hands of the Indians. If I hear any differently I'll let you know. For a piece of disinterested friendship I'll give you the advice to get out of here as soon as possible, or you may drop into something of the same kind."

Just what honesty there was in the advice Madelaine did not suspect. How could she know the thought that flitted across the mind of the captain?

"Faith! this black-eyed beauty is more to my taste; and there's a bigger fortune there than in the other. If I was sure that Tigertooth wouldn't stand by him it would be wisdom to loost him a little faster over the range, and go in for the sorrowing maiden. Those Mexican herdsmen would try to bite, no doubt—they look as though they would like to now—but they would be no good against my mountain toughs. By the fiend! If there's nothing left in the game with Raleigh, I'll try it."

It may have been best for Rhoda that she had never inspired anything like a passionate regard in the heart of her captor. He had only hinted at it to Raimondo in the way of business. A little strange it was, too; and only to be accounted for by the rule of contrasts. Few but would have admitted her beauty was the greater.

"If I was only full-handed! This is what comes of leaving half the gang behind. I might have known I would have a chance to use them all and a few recruits besides. If I can't find the major, there is precious little use to look for his cache; while a mine in this corner of the globe is no good without a fortune to run it."

It was a little before sunset when he reached his camp in the rocks. His men were not likely to fail in watchfulness, with red-skins as neighbors and a captain whose rule, when on business, was like a rod of iron.

Rhoda was crouched in one corner of the recess, and looked at him coldly as he came.

"You have heard nothing of my father?"

"Nothing."

He threw himself lazily down, and busied himself with his own thoughts.

The darkness came, and though a little fire

was lighted in one corner of the recess the gloom was oppressive.

Tigertooth seemed to have had some trouble in arranging the Americans to his satisfaction, since his coming was long delayed. Wilson, by and by, threw himself down for a nap. When he awoke it seemed to him that he must have been sleeping for hours, and one of his men was standing over him.

"Ther' red hez come, captain. Shell we let him in? Tom held him off on ther ledge tell we got orders."

"Correct. Pass his royal highness in. Then get well down toward the canyon and keep a close lookout. It's darker than the ten of spades, and if he's not playing me fair I want to take no chances."

The man departed, while Wilson threw some light wood on the smoldering embers of the fire. It blazed up merrily, and by its cheery glow he saw Tigertooth.

The chief looked in rather worse humor than he had done in the afternoon, and under almost any other circumstances Wilson would not have cared to tackle him. He understood, however, the tie, if so it might be called, that existed between him and Raimondo, and that the latter had once saved his life, for which he ought to be fairly thankful. It was really to meet Raimondo that the chief had come thither, preferring to do so rather than to have the white men in his own camp.

"You come late, chief," was Wilson's greeting, "but the scalp of a great brave is worth more than that of a boy. I did not think you would leave till you had driven the tiger from its lair."

"The tiger bites too hard to drive out; he will lie under a mountain of stones and save his scalp. Where is Carjador?"

The chief looked around him, his eye resting for a second or two on Rhoda.

"Carjador lies in his camp, with a bullet through his back, and cannot come. His foes are your foes, and I am his friend. Will you go to him or will you treat with me?"

"Raimondo is a brother, but Tigertooth cannot go to him to-night. He will hear what the friend of Carjador has to say."

"Carjador will be all right in a few days. It was a foul shot at his back and it was a chance he was not killed. The chief knows for what his white brothers have come?"

"Once before Raimondo came, and went away empty. If Tigertooth could help him, he would. He knows nothing of mines—the yellow rocks lie away to the east."

"But there was gold hidden years ago. Has it ever been found? One man who hid has come to search for it with a tribe at his back. Tigertooth has slain his army, or scattered it, but the man himself may have slipped clear. Yonder is his daughter."

There was a gleam of the eye, a nervous clutch of the hand, that betrayed the interest there was to the chief in that announcement, though in an instant he was himself again.

"While the cache remains unfound," continued Wilson, "there will always be searchers after it. Were it once known in a mining-camp across the border, a thousand men might move in a night. Even Tigertooth could not keep them at bay. Raimondo heard part of the story from the other man who made the cache, and told it only to me a sun or two ago. Others may hear of it, and tell others, till it will no longer be worth Carjador's while to help drive them out. Tell us what you know of the treasure, and name your own price."

Wilson spoke calmly and carefully. He believed the old chief knew the secret if any other than the major did. He believed, too, that something beyond the red-letter agreement had been found in Medicine Bowl. If so, and Raleigh was dead, Tigertooth, if any one, should know what it was.

The chief looked at the outlaw captain for a full minute in silence. Then his eyes roved to Rhoda, and extending his long, bony finger, he hissed:

"She must die!"

CHAPTER XXXV.

AN EVENING UP ALL AROUND.

THE solemnity of Tigertooth's declaration did not appear to impress Captain Wilson a particle. There was no change in the business-like murmur of his voice as he answered.

"Certainly; I have not a particle of objection—provided I first find the cache. She may know something; and if her father is living he will come to find her and will meet me. In one way or another she must bring me his secret, and I'll nurse her tenderly till she does. If you can tell me all I want to know, and show me all I want to see, you can take her right along."

"Tigertooth can tell what he knows, but such hidden treasure as his white friend speaks of—there is none. If her father, the slave medicine-man, lives, he dies too."

"Tell your story, then, and we will see what it is worth. I have an idea Raimondo and I have not got to the bottom of things yet, and you may bring us a little nearer."

Then the chief gave a history such as Rhoda

had sometimes suspected, but never before heard.

Years before, two men were captured by his tribe. They had made their escape from the Yaqui country, where they appeared to have also been prisoners. During the taking they managed to bite pretty hard, and would have been put to the torture had not one of them announced himself a medicine-man, and proved it by curing the head chief, who was then lying at death's door.

The affair was unfortunate, since it nearly broke up the tribe. The friends of the dead wanted to go on and slay the prisoners, while the friends of the living and lately cured chief wanted them to go free.

A compromise was made; and the two white men were held as captives, being thenceforth called The Slave Medicine Man and his friend. For several years they were held, and right good medicine did they make in the Medicine Bowl.

Unfortunately, after several years of notable service, in which they had almost gained the confidence of the tribe, they nearly extinguished several families, and made their escape.

The father of Tigertooth was among their victims and he had sworn on the bones of his ancestors to have revenge.

"Interesting," was Captain Wilson's comment, "but where does the cache come in?"

There was none. Even if they had found a mine among those mountains they could have saved but little in their secret mining, and the hidden treasure was not worth looking after. Besides, who can find it?

Tigertooth became more earnest. As Wilson stepped back he followed. They stepped under the shelter of the overhanging rock, and Rhoda, who heard all, was near to them.

Wilson shook his head.

"I'm a medicine-man myself, with a big M. I know how it is. They may have deceived you. The gold is somewhere, and the girl yonder is the key, somehow, with which to unlock the secret. She stays in my lodge until it is found."

"The bones of my father hang, white and dry, in the air, and I have sworn to place a scalp there to make his breath laugh."

"No cache, no scalp."

Wilson grew bolder, if anything, in the face of danger.

"She is the daughter of the white medicine, and should stand in the fire. As the brother of Raimondo, I would not harm thee; but stand thou not between. She must die!"

It was but a single spring to her side, and he made it, his left hand clutching at her wrist, his right brandishing his war-ax. He was in deadly earnest, and it seemed as if there was no hope.

"Frank! Mr. Foxton!" Rhoda cried, unable to meet her doom silently, and calling in her extremity for the man who had more than once saved her.

"Coming, my dear," answered a voice above her head, and yet within the semi-cavern. And with the voice came a pistol-shot, followed by a click as a second hammer struck on a damaged shell.

Wilson was as cool and deadly as ever. At the sound of the voice he sprang back; at the report of the derringer he drew his revolver. Foxton had chosen his derringers for the work because, at that distance, they were more certain to stun, and sure to kill. When the cartridge in the second one failed him, for a moment he was at the outlaw's mercy.

Rhadamanthus had given Jones his bearings and he had led them directly up to the tableland from which, that evening, he had watched the camp.

When they reached the edge of the overhanging rock the conference had just begun. Although the speakers were beneath them, with twenty feet of rock between, every word came distinctly to their ears. Foxton thought it worth while to listen, but when he detected the rising anger in the voice of Tigertooth he deemed it time to act.

"Dave is no good down there but he can keep an eye on the ledge, and make it sultry for the Eagles if they try to come in. Fasten your rope somewhere, Robert, and lower me down. I'll take a hand in this chin-chin myself."

So Foxton hurriedly whispered, and just in time he came dropping into sight of the tragic scene.

There was no time to hesitate. His foot was in a stirrup, and in either hand he held a derringer. A few seconds more meant Rhoda's death. Tigertooth's blow was already launching. With his right hand he shot the chief through the brain; with his left, the arm still wound around the lariat, he took aim at the greater rascal—to hang a second later, at his mercy.

"Too fresh, by half!" laughed the outlaw. "It's been some time getting around to it, but on this occasion I think I'll take you just where you live. Good-by, Mr. Foxton, and remember me to Tigertooth and the rest."

He raised his hand, the hammer back and his forefinger on the trigger.

There was a crash, a little shoot of flame; but it was not Mr. Foxton that was lying on the ground with a bullet through his heart, and just

the shadow of spasmodic life left in his finger ends and toes.

"I reckon he's lied!" croaked a harsh voice from the top of the rocks, beyond the gash and the ledge along which was the entrance to the place.

"He played dirt on Old Sirene, and rubbed it in; but blamed ef he's seen me later."

Rhoda Raleigh never felt more comfortable in her life than she did for just the first instant after Frank Foxton's arm went around her, though the Fresh Sport never lost his head. In the unoccupied hand he was holding a revolver, and his eye was on the trail.

"Hands up, there!" he called crisply, as the Black Eagles, alarmed by the firing, came rushing up.

"We've taken the boss into town, and we're ready, now, for you."

Jones had already slid down the rope. With his double-barrel he commanded the path, while above, on either side, Old Sirene and Destiny Dave were handling their guns. One by one the outlaws stepped into the line of the fire with their hands upraised. They recognized that voice, and knew that it generally told the truth. As Foxton had no earthly use for prisoners he simply disarmed them, and turned them loose down the canyon.

"Well, boys," said Foxton, when the smoke had fairly cleared away, the outlaws and the corpses had been disposed of, "if we don't see 'em sooner we'll have Tigertooth's hounds on the trail by daybreak. I needn't say there's little fun, and less profit fighting them. The fact is I've had all the fun I want till I take a rest. If we started now we might stand a better chance to take that rest at the hacienda or Brace Box, than somewhere around here, under a rock. I vote to go at once."

"But my father?" said Rhoda, in a troubled voice. She had already whispered her thanks.

"You can do nothing for him except double his danger. He is in the hands of his friends and you can't reach him. If he's not heard from I'll come back and look after him; but just now you don't want to stand on the ceremony of your going, but go at once. If the reds get to our horses before we do it's good-morning Mr. Foxton and party. Rhadamanthus is down there, somewhere in the darkness, but he can't carry the gang. And Destiny Dave, up there, is a pretty badly wounded man."

It seemed a terrible alternative to Rhoda; but Frank Foxton's judgment began to count for a good deal with her, and she agreed to go.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE DAMSEL AND THE DIAMONDS.

SOME time after daylight the fugitives were in the saddle and were industriously seeking the long valley through which they expected to make their retreat.

Foxton saw in the distance, upon their left flank, a single horseman, who, on closer inspection, turned out to be an Indian. He made gestures of amity, and seemed to desire to speak with them.

Looking about to see that there was no probability of an ambush, Foxton sent the party on, while he quickened his speed somewhat and deflected from his course. The red-skin came to meet him, and finally, riding side by side, so that no time was lost, they held quite a conversation. Then they separated, and the sport rejoined his friends.

"Good news!" he said to Rhoda, as he came up.

"Yonder buck is quite a free lance—what they call a dog-soldier further east. He is fighting around on his own hook, hitting pretty much as he sees a head. Desired me to remember him to you as Rattlesnake, your friend, and the friend of your father."

"Your father is still in the land of the living, and he seems to think will come out all right. Raimondo, also, is doing well. Rattlesnake has captured the ambulance, and is sending the two wounded men and the senorita back in that. After the little stock operation of last night he does not think it advisable for us to join them. As the friend of the defunct Tigertooth, Raimondo and his company, with the smuggled major will probably be allowed to go in peace, but if we were traced to the train there would be war from 'way back."

"My father is safe, then!" joyfully exclaimed Rhoda.

"Yet I saw him fall right in the way of outlaws and Indians. How did he escape?"

"Rattlesnake takes the cucumber. He first avenged his fall, and then carried away the body, to bring it to life again. I don't think he is an ardent admirer of the unreliable Don, and it seems big risks to put two such foes together in the same wagon; but he wasn't throwing away a chance to save the major. When the reds get tired filling rocks in that hole they'll be after me—and any one else they can strike incidentally. He also puts a great deal of trust in the power of the senorita, whom he left in command. We may strike them on the plain beyond the foot-hills; but the chances are the first thing we see of them will be at the hacienda, where I propose now to get as fast as possible."

They rode on as they talked. As yet there were no signs of pursuit, and even Destiny Dave was full of hope.

"Poor father!" said Rhoda, at length.

"It was his last throw. He has wasted a little fortune, and will scarce be able to try again. The fate of his *cache* will remain a mystery; and the mine will rest unworked."

The sport smiled encouragingly.

"That's a very good way to look at it; but you don't seem to take into account the presence of Frank Foxton. Unless I was one of the gentry, a friend of the Government, and in with the priests, for a mine in Mexico I wouldn't give shucks. The gold the medicine-men buried was unearthed by the reds long ago, and scattered with the careless profusion of animals who have no use for it. Now, from what Rattlesnake says, there's more silver than gold in the secret shaft. A very good thing it would be to have in front of Trinity Church, but not of much account here.

"As to the *third* object of the major's search—if you will observe, Mr. Foxton has been around."

He reined in his mustang, and unloosing a strap under his coat, drew from his back a golden cross set with five diamonds, every one of which looked as though it might be a ransom for a king.

"Loot from a monastery, somewhere down in Central America, I should judge. Your father was a soldier of fortune there for some years, and he and his pard, when their side failed, fled northward, carrying the cross with them. I supposed it escaped the Indians, as being part of his medicine paraphernalia that could not be examined too closely. When they set sail from here they carried principally gold-dust. This was the *cache* your father was most anxious to find, and it was luck in a lump that he hadn't finished digging when the chief of the Black Eagles and Raimondo asked for hands."

"And, after all, it falls to you!" sighed Rhoda, looking a little wistfully at sport and diamonds.

"Yes, the damsel and the diamond; while the major keeps the coach. I do think I'm ahead on the division," laughed Foxton, lightly. Then he added, with an earnestness that he seldom showed:

"Of course I am keeping them for you. You will be quite an heiress, or your father will be a rich man, when we reach the hacienda."

They had their little adventures along the road, such as starvation, dying for water, and the like, but from human foes Mr. Foxton's revolvers had a rest, and in the combined wisdom of the party they managed to reach the Banzos Hacienda some twenty-four hours ahead of the ambulance that brought Madeline, the major and Don Raimondo Carjador.

The latter was in a subdued condition. Madeline and his wound had been about too much for him, and he was ready to play the reformed villain with the best of intentions. He and the major, who was almost as good as new, had not only patched up a truce, but had almost arranged a partnership in the great silver bonanza that afterward took Carjador's name. It is to be hoped that each got his full half-loaf.

Madeline, in spite of her customary aplomb, was inclined to meet Frank Foxton shyly. She did not suppose she had broken his heart, but she was willing to admit she had not treated him and Rhoda altogether fairly.

Then Mr. Foxton, divining the state of the case, whispered:

"Don't be troubled about me. It was all for fun, no doubt, and there's no one dead or badly wounded. If you can find out how Rhoda feels and let me know, I'll shake hands with the Don and sacrifice to the shades of Captain Wilson."

After that she was quite at her ease, and she said to him one day, looking at Rhoda tripping across the *patio* from a visit to her father:

"I have an idea that it would not hurt you to hope."

Mr. Foxton spoke accordingly, which I suppose accounts for his being in business on Wall street with his father-in-law, and Raleigh being the first letter in the name of the senior partner of the firm that floated "The Great Guadana Grant Mining Company." He will no doubt be "fresh" till he dies; but with a wife who understands and appreciates him, and several blooming responsibilities, he has given such hostages to fortune, that it is not at all likely he will ever break out in a fresh place. The remnant of the characters in this "o'er true" history having no further influence or bearing on the lives of the Fresh Sport and his family, drop from sight, and the reader has reached

THE END.

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